

Ian MacLeod: Home Time

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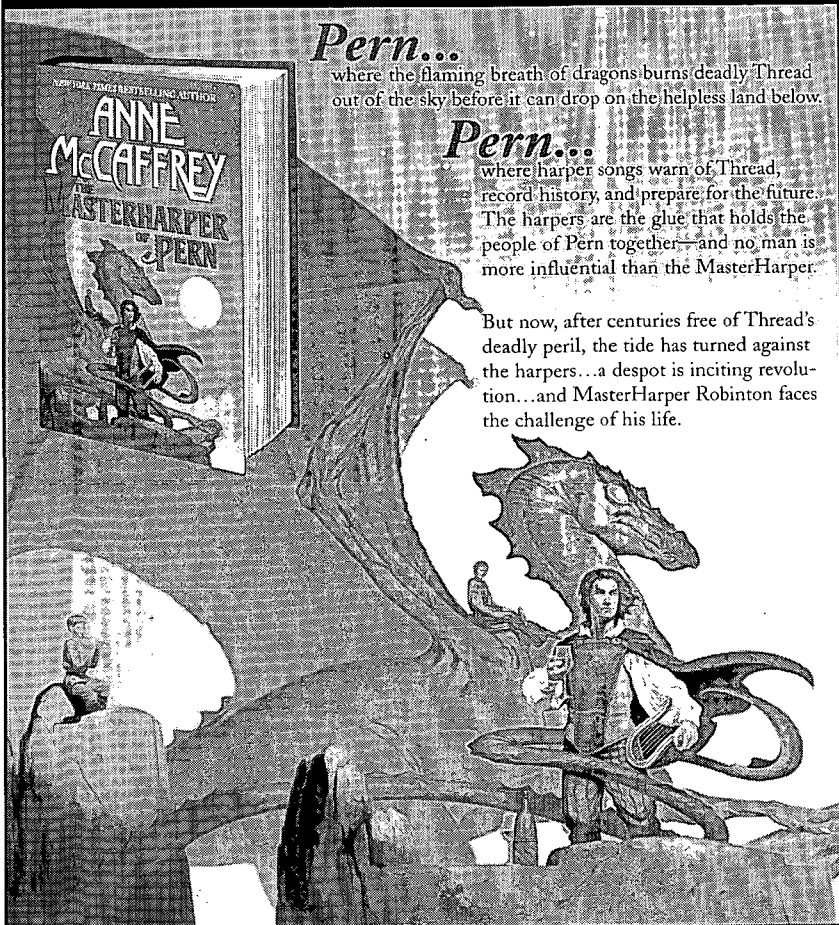
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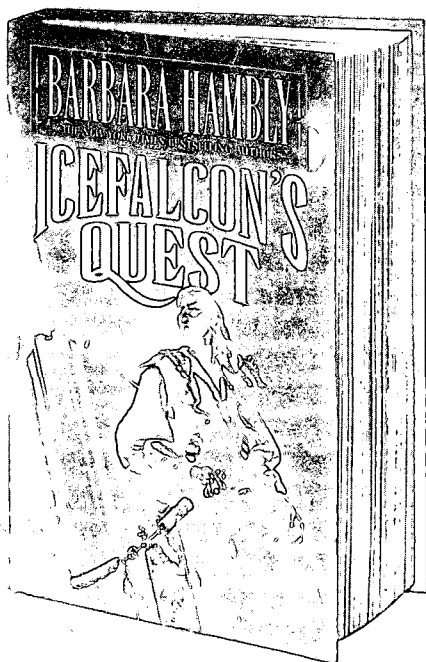


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*Voyages by Starlight, Ian MacLeod's first story collection, came out last year, and just a few months later his first novel, The Great Wheel, appeared to good reviews. His last appearance here was "Verglas" (Oct. 1996) and this story finds him again exploring colder climes, but this time the trip to the Antarctic region yields some decidedly unexpected results....*

# Home Time

By Ian R. MacLeod

**M**ORNINGS HERE ARE JUST as bad as mornings anywhere else. I sit up in my bunk and scowl at the mirror. The ceiling feels close as a coffin over-

head, and if I reach out either way, I can touch the walls. We travelers need a tight place to call our own; a burrow to crawl into. Here at Epsilon Base, we call them torpedo tubes.

It's my turn to fix breakfast. The three of us chomp shriveled waffles and pseudo-bacon hunched around the little table in the kitchen area. We've all put on weight during our stay; stress and boredom do that to you. Janey's in jeans that were tight three months ago when we started out and now look simply painful, the same T-shirt as yesterday and the day before. Figgis rereads one of his old technical mags, a glob of butter hanging on the strands of the beard he's grown over a face still neat with youth. No one says a word. Janey tosses her greasy blonde hair. She sighs. As I didn't hear any sleep-period ramblings between their torpedo tubes, I guess I'm sitting in the chilly slipstream of a lover's argument.

My turn to clean up. Funny how often the rota works that way, but

still I can't be bothered to argue. Gives me something to do before we get ready for the final Jump. In a nice domestic touch, Epsilon's Korean designers placed the tiny basin beside a porthole so you can see out as you stand there. I plunge my hands into the warm recycled water.

Outside, the storm has died. My hands pause, aimless fish swimming. Ice furs the rim of the porthole like the white spray that was used in shop windows at Christmas back in England when I was a kid. It's October, which means that the sun here dances a fire around the horizon. The high winds of a few hours ago have left streaks in the ice like the claw marks of some giant animal. The storm may have died, but faintly through the filtered triple glass, I can still hear the wind. In the Antarctic, it never stops.

By the same cosmic coincidence that made it my turn to cook and clear, it also falls to me to check the outside of Epsilon before our next Jump. There's no room for me to kit up in my outsuit in my torpedo tube, so I have to do it in the one corner of the cramped living pod that isn't strung with washing. Figgis and Janey just sit around and watch as I strip down to bra and knickers. I'm conscious of my wobbling marbled flesh and the stray bits of body hair, but of course I'm just good old Doctor Woolley; she's past modesty and all that kind of thing.

It feels good to squeeze into the privacy of the inner hatch, to bang it shut and watch the warm air cloud to crystal as the frozen atmosphere gushes in. There's no question that, barring the ocean floor, I'm facing the most hostile atmosphere on Earth. Nothing compared to Io or Venus, of course, but astronauts don't have to breathe the atmosphere or fiddle bare-handed with bits of frozen machinery that can peel the skin off your hands like a rubber glove. And astronauts have up-to-date equipment. And they're all Taiwanese.

The outer hatch booms open. The shiny outsuit hisses and squeals as it adjusts to the 60-degree drop in temperature. I climb out and down. The white hits my eyes. My lungs go solid tight inside my chest. I glance back. Janey's face is at the porthole. She gives me a smile and a wave, like someone moving off on a train. I stomp a few yards across the ice.

Epsilon is shaped like a dumpy starfish. The central mound contains the main life support systems and the comms bay, with the kitchen, the torpedo tubes, the living bay, the medical bay and snout of the canhopper

fanning off. I can't say that Epsilon actually *looks* like a starfish because — in the one part of the deal that our college really held out for — the whole of the outer body was re-coated in military-grade camouflage paint before we left our home time. Even now, from what must be no more than twenty shuffling paces away, I have to squint hard to make it out as more than another frost ghost given momentary reality by the wind. Janey's gone. Figgis, too. I could almost be alone.

I pick my way around the drifts and hollows, checking for accidental debris; anomalies that would almost certainly destroy us. The bitter wind pushes and pulls at me like an argument. It roars in my ears. I do a slow circuit of Epsilon, then another for luck. The wind has already raked away my first footsteps. I brush ice away from the canhopper's cockpit.

"Woolley!" Janey's voice suddenly crackles over the wind in my ears. "What are you *doing* out there?"

"Won't be long," I say, then pluck off a glove to reach inside my hood and dislodge the comms wire. I don't need you, Janey, not out here. Woolley doesn't need anyone.

I breathe the air. The wind snatches the frozen vapor from my lips and throws it back in my face as grit. Overhead, the sky is lace over blue oblivion. When I was a child and my mother first told me stories about this place, I used to imagine that there really was a pole up here, striped like a candy stick, around which the planet revolved.

I squint, darkening the lenses of my goggles by a couple of notches with the presspad inside my mittens as I re-inspect the ground. But it makes little difference. Pure Antarctic roars over my inadequate senses. I'm leaning twenty degrees into the wind just to stand up. Looking down at my feet, I see the drift ice racing. Nothing feels still. Snow here is as rare as rain in a desert; all that ever happens is that the wind drives the ice, scooping it into high drifts, baring the underlying strata, destroying — thank God — every trace of life. White on white on white. I still have to keep reminding myself that we are in the Year of Our Lord, 1890.

Gladstone is Prime Minister in England. Zeta Tauri is still a distant star. Etcetera, etcetera. Look at it this way: if I turned my back and walked out across the ice away from Epsilon, if I crossed the Queen Maud Mountains and got as far as the McMurdo Sound and came across a whaler lost amid the penguins and icebergs far from its normal hunting ground,

if those rough and stinking men would take me aboard, I could visit India in the Raj, Imperial Saint Petersburg, Venice before the flood. Chat with Marx or Freud, ride through London in a hansom cab. The whole world — if my very presence didn't cause it to heave into oblivion — would be mine.

My toes are dying off. I turn back. When I reach the porthole, I remember that I've torn out my comms wire. A tiny worm of panic bores at my spine. But there's no need to worry. Janey's seen Woolley through the porthole, and she lets Woolley in. She and Figgis once again watch the show as this ugly butterfly strips from her chrysalis outsuit, but by now I can't be bothered to feel any irritation. We've all got other things on our minds.

It's time for our final Jump up the line. We clamber through the internal hatch to the communications bay. Figgis is in charge of this aspect of the mission, so he gets the comfy chair in front of the console while Janey leans her rump against a mainframe that's so old it bears an IBM logo. I have to stoop awkwardly under a plastic strut.

Figgis drums his fingers. Janey chews her lips vigorously. Pushing strands of graying mousy hair back from my face, I wonder what exactly it is that I do that gets on their nerves. The numbers on the 2D screen tick by in seconds. The console is a mess of the scribbled stickers that Figgis used to re-label the original Korean han'gûl script. Taped beside it is a postcard of Interlaken where he took a pre-Epsilon break, blowing what little advance money the College had been prepared to loan him. The plastic ski runs on the arid mountain slopes look like spilled rolls of toilet paper.

Jumps are something I can never get used to. This is the fifteenth if you count the big power surge that first threw us back to 1565 and the vicinity of the South Pole. From there we've moved up through the years — collecting data and growing increasingly weary of each other — by a series of smaller Jumps powered by our own internal batteries. Now at least we're that much closer to home.

Figgis gives up drumming his fingers and begins to stroke his beard, tugging it as though he's trying to pluck a chicken. The minutes plod by on the screen, and each one is just like any other. But this time of waiting is special with worry. Jumps involve the orbit of the Earth around the Sun,

the rotation and the ever-outward drift of the Galaxy. And then you must add to that the flow of time itself. What actually happens is that for a dimensionless moment we exist in several times and places at once, hovering like a mayfly over the waters of reality as Epsilon calculates exactly where we should land. So far, the system has worked perfectly....

That's what's happening now. We Jump and the porthole on our right fills with the soundless buzz of the Jump, which is almost the way the old-fashioned TV screens used to go between channels, but pushed back to three or possibly four dimensions. A blizzard without color or sound, a glimpse into the swirling plughole of the non-universe, a place where there is in fact no light at all, where the absence of everything means even an absence of nothing. We all know that our eyes are simply tricking us when we try to look. We know by now that it's better not to.

The screen registers contact. Stocking ladders of data flutter and clear. Figgis sits back and rests his hands behind his neck. The chair creaks. I can smell his sweat. I guess he can smell mine. We brace ourselves for something more. But that's it. This is March 14, 1912. Epsilon is well within tolerance — even if we're not. Figgis pulls harder at his beard. Janey draws another flake of skin back across her lips.

"So what we have here," Figgis says, "is 1912. Tell us what's happening, Woolley."

This is our ritual. I half-close my eyes and recite that Asquith is Prime Minister in Britain, that the Titanic will soon be starting her maiden voyage from Southampton. I describe how Nijinsky's wowing Paris, and explain that China has just become a Republic. I don't mention that Roald Amundsen has reached the Pole a month and a half ago, and that Captain Scott's men are still struggling to get back to Cape Evans. That goes without saying.

"You see," Figgis says to Janey, tipping her a smile, the beginnings of a reconciliation. "Woolley knows her stuff."

"That's me," I say. I grin and slap the strut I'm leaning on with one of my big hammy hands. "Good old Doctor Woolley...." Epsilon booms faintly. "Let's get going."

"You're the boss," Janey smiles up at me. For a weird moment, I can almost see why men find her attractive. And I wonder if I'd become a lesbian if she turned it on strongly enough using all that stuff with the

pressing tits and the fluttering eyelashes, the way she does with Figgis. Perhaps that would be the answer to all Woolley's problems. Janey's smile widens. Woolley finds herself blushing as she heads for the ladder between the dangling knickers and Y-fronts.

**J**ANEY PILOTS the canhopper. Figgis and I squat on the rumbling seats over the engines with the stretcher rack crammed behind. Watching Janey now, brushing the controls as though they were bruised, the sleeves of her outsuit rolled back from those narrow wrists, I can't help but admire her ease and absorption. The canhopper rocks slightly as the eddy from an ice dune tucks under the fuselage and her hand slides out to brush the boost control. The tone of the right engine alters a fraction through my pelvis, then resumes.

Figgis has got the big Canon holocam balanced on his lap. He nods toward it and says to me, "Did I tell you that Janey and I gave this a trial run a few weeks ago in her torpedo tube?" He's grinning. Back in 1650, Janey and Figgis were at maximum rut for each other. It didn't exactly keep them quiet, but it did keep them more or less out of my way.

I force a nod, and the skin of my outsuit crackles as if it shares my discomfort. Janey's eyes are still on the window. She doesn't even blink. She's so wrapped up in piloting the canhopper that Figgis and I can talk about her as though she isn't here. Over her head on the console is the date and time. March 14, 1912. And the day is yet young; Epsilon's computers have thoughtfully avoided any kind of Jump lag. It's still only 10:30 in the morning.

Trackless, unseen, undetected, we sail five meters above the ice desert on an electro-magnetic tide. I was expecting a storm, but everything looks clear and sharp as a wedding cake, the sun gold and midway down the sky now, well into the polar autumn. As always, I looked for changes when we first crawled out onto the shattered ice of this new era, but there was nothing. If it were safe for us to Jump as far 1950, it might be possible to pick out that faint grayish haze that the jet pilots had started to report in the sky, but the real differences in this polar environment are being sniffed out by Epsilon's many sensors. More methane; more nitrogen, more carbon dioxide. More of most things apart from oxygen. Even if the

dictates of relative safety hadn't determined our choice, the very sterility of the Antarctic would still have made it an ideal place for monitoring the planet. But that's down to the data in the spectrometers that our college will eventually download and sell to the highest bidder. All our poor human senses can report is whiteness.

Janey clicks her lips open. "This is it, folks," she says.

I lean forward to see out of the windscreen. She's right; there are black specks on the horizon. The canhopper sails quickly toward them.

Flags. Uptilted skis.

"For God's sake don't knock anything over...." Figgis murmurs.

But Janey's in control. The engines sigh to a halt. The canhopper settles its smooth underside a safe distance away across the ice.

We bang elbows as we seal up the outsuits and the specially wide and flat-soled shoes. Figgis says he thinks Woolley should go first. Janey nods from underneath her hood and mask. I feel a flood of gratitude, but as I unseal the hatch, I wonder if they're doing it this way just so that Woolley'll get the blame if anything goes wrong. Not that any of us really need to worry about *that*.

And out. And down the steps. This really does feel like a historic moment. Even if Scott is a month gone from the Pole and Amundsen by longer, we're lonely travelers here, too. Amid these fragile signs of human presence, it feels as if we've arrived *somewhere* at last. The wind pours over me. It flutters the Norwegian and British flags. The little tent Amundsen left behind is half-buried in drift ice. He's already safely back at Framheim and preparing to report his triumph to the world, but Scott's team are still out there, with Petty Officer Evans already dead and Captain Oates starting to limp badly....

Black shapes of tent and ski poles, the sun low and distant across the sparkling ice. The whole scene belongs in some Edwardian painting, but it makes me feel incredibly nostalgic for past times of my own, for the stories my mother used to tell me on late afternoons after school by the lake in the park. Though she had never been to the Arctic, she filled my head with dreams of whiteness; a once-upon-a-time continent that, at least until this last dreadful century, remained almost untouched by man. She told me about Shackleton, Amundsen, Scott.... Their names grew sharp for me as pavement frost. I saw them as silhouettes in the wild white

dark, hopeless and determined, their ships crushed by the ice, death walking beside them, struggling endlessly back toward base camp.

We have a picture show back at Epsilon when we've finished. We're all unusually chatty. I don't know about Janey and Figgis, but for me the ordinary details we found out there were the biggest shock. These men may be legends from my childhood history, but here at the Pole they were just weary and afraid. They left an inconsequential litter behind them. God knows why, but one of those narrow bicycle repair tins was lying out on the rough ice. There were frozen dog turds from the huskies, a Norwegian cigarette packet, a screwed-up wrapper of Cadbury's chocolate. It almost looked like the remains of a picnic. I longed to touch.

We kept the holocam running all of the time, and that's what we're watching now. We didn't realize what we were doing at the time as we grouped self-consciously around the tent and the flag, but our pose mimics with terrible clarity those old shots of Amundsen's and Scott's teams doing the same thing. It's eerie. We look almost as tired and afraid.

Janey makes dinner for a change. She ransacks the store for freeze-dried plaice and mushrooms, little balls of cardboardy rice. She looks at Figgis all the time he eats. A peace offering, of course. He gets the message and rumbles male comments about how good it tastes. And there's some acidic Frascati she's reconstituted to loosen us up. We keep the conversation safe, going over ground already worn smooth with repetition.

After coffee, I offer to clear up in the expectation that Janey and Figgis will beat a swift retreat to the torpedo tubes to discuss more urgent matters. But something goes wrong behind my back and Janey storms off alone, shouting *You Never this and Why Don't You that*, leaving Figgis drumming his fingers on the table and the cramped atmosphere colder than it is out there beyond the porthole.

More than happy to stay out of it, I take a shower and give myself a good rubdown, marveling at the swelling blue veins in my legs. Then I flop down inside my Korean-sized torpedo tube balled up in my dressing gown. Faintly, I can hear Janey still sobbing next door. I close my eyes. Relax, Woolley. Tomorrow's a big day. The biggest. I wish I could imagine —

Figgis raps on the hatch. He wants to talk. I let him in.

"This all is so *ordinary*," he says, crouched between the little shelf and the rim of the bunk. "Janey and I are arguing like kids. I wish I had your distance from this kind of thing, Woolley."

"Didn't the College psychologists tell you what was going to happen when they did the profiles?"

He shakes his head, then nods. "Yeah, but I didn't believe them." He pulls at his beard. "What did they tell you?"

"They told me I'd be lonely.... They told me I was used to it and that I would cope." I pause, but why not speak the truth for a change? "They told me that you two squabbling and screwing would get on my nerves."

He reaches out a hand. My veiny leg is sticking out of my dressing gown as far as my thigh. He gives it a pat. "I'm sorry, Woolley."

"That's okay," I say, shifting slightly to cover myself. "You read any truthful account of this kind of mission, it's always the same. Think of Bligh on the *Bounty*."

Figgis grins. "And Captain Oates is cursing Scott for his incompetence at this very moment."

"That's right," I say.

He pauses. Janey's gone quiet next door. Probably listening to us, trying to catch the words over Epsilon's plastic hum and the muffled scream of the wind. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Fire away."

"Tell me how you feel about sex, Woolley. I've always wondered."

"You mean, do ugly people have a sex drive? And if so, what do we do with it?"

He doesn't answer. He's down to shorts and a cutoff T-shirt that's ridden up over his taut belly so that I can see the beginnings of his pubic hair. His whole body is clear and sharp; no cause for shame. His eyes are sharp too, and his breath smells sweet through that ridiculous beard: maybe he's drunk another bottle of the wine. You get used to seeing bits of people when you're a doctor. But that isn't the same as the whole.

"Yes," I say. "I do have a sex drive. And I'm not a virgin, either. I was once nineteen like everybody else. You know what it used to be like at those parties when the College was still taking regular admissions? When people paired off, there was always some lad drunk enough to do the ugly bitch in the corner a favor. I went through all of that...that phase. But sex

on its own is a disappointment, isn't it? It's everything that surrounds it that counts."

Figgis's eyes don't flicker. He's watching me the way Janey watches the instruments when she's piloting the canhopper. "Would you have liked to have children?" he asks.

That's another question entirely, although I understand from my own bitter inward arguments that it follows on neatly enough. Is that why I'm thinking about my mother so much these days?

I take a breath: "I don't know," I say. "Things would just be different. I probably wouldn't be here for a start."

"Yeah," he says with a sigh, and I realize that I've been tactless. He leans forward. I like the way his young muscles move, and for a moment I wonder if I don't detect some sexual charge — or at least a need for sharing — in this close torpedo air. But he's just trying to shift his arse on the uncomfortable rim of the shelf. Figgis, he's at ease with Woolley. He could almost be on his own. He says, "Do you think Janey's asleep?"

"I doubt it."

"Well maybe I should go see her. Clear the air."

I smile. "You do that."

So Figgis works his way out of Woolley's torpedo tube and bangs the hatch shut, leaving me with his faint mannish odor, my own stale disappointments. I dim the lights and lie back. I play music through my earset for a while. It's Bill Evans in concert, June 25, 1961, but even as the bassline joins the piano for "My Foolish Heart," I can hear Janey and Figgis next door. Making up. He's groaning, she's groaning. It's no good. I turn the music off and wait for silence. And it comes, it comes. With Epsilon humming and the faint gathering storm, my fingers reach down and find the place, and touch. I realize that I'm aroused anyway. Poor old Woolley gets off just on the sound of other people doing it. My fingers circle and dance. The darkness moves with them. For a few moments, the sun breaks through the rainclouds and flickers white on a lake where laughing bodies dive and mingle, going deep to a place where there's nothing but music, nothing but light.

My vision spins back. This torpedo tube. The sound of my heart. Eventually, I sleep, and I dream, as so often recently, about my mother. And with her face, with her voice, comes an echo of trolley wheels

squealing along a hospital corridor, the bright wash of fluorescent light, the itchy feel of the stool on which I had to sit and wait for her on that day she went to collect her test results. The dream's so familiar that part of me's just watching. As she comes back through those swing doors and stoops toward me, somehow still managing to keep a smile on her face — looking, in fact, almost relieved — I realize that she must have already known that she had cancer. Mum was also a doctor, after all. And they always tend to expect the worst when their own health's at stake. So this would just be confirmation that she was dying.

Perhaps she brought me with her to the hospital for moral support; perhaps it was just because it was in the school holidays and she didn't know what else to do with me. And I sat waiting for her on that seat in the corridor whilst the nurse behind the desk gave me sweets that had gone sticky in their wrappers.

The face of the woman I see coming out through those double doors — big jaw, small mouth, big forehead, large, deep, close-set eyes — is much like the one that stares back at me nowadays from the mirror, even if I do sometimes wish I could manage her smile. Mum said something to me as she bent down. Always in these dreams, I can see her lips move, but I can't quite understand. Not exactly. It was something about making the most of time, love. Time. Love. Home. Not Long...something like that. And, as always in my dream — in memory, too — I strain to catch her words. But I can never quite hear them.

**M**UM DIED WITHIN A YEAR. She turned gray and her skin faded off her big bones and the pain that she was reluctant to take medication for often made her irritable. Little Woolley was eleven by then, with most of her mother's ugly features, most of her mother's aptitudes. Like Mum, I was already a loner, the giver and taker of easy playground jokes. And, like Mum, I eventually became a doctor. The only thing about me, really, that's different — until recently, anyway, when even my own biological clock has given off the occasional pre-menopausal *ping* — is that I've never entertained thoughts of having children. Not that Mum took the usual step of pairing off with a suitable man. Like me, I suppose, that course was less than straightforward for her. She went instead to a

sperm bank and had the thing done coldly, methodically, without all the lies and the fumbling, the pretenses of passion. Thus it was that little Woolley, the product of a nameless and unknown father, finally entered the world. Thus it was that Woolley began a life that has ended up here in the Antarctic of a different century as the product of genes which had, appropriately enough, been frozen.

Two hours out from Epsilon on the trail of the British Antarctic Expedition under the command of Robert Falcon Scott. Janey pushes the canhopper hard across the ice plateau. She's in control. Figgis drums his fingers. The tight air inside the canhopper resonates as the engines drone. Whatever happened between the two of them last night has left a residue that lies somewhere between love, lust, anger, despair; the Greeks probably had a word for it. It seems to me that they've both finally realized that this relationship is heading in the same direction as every other relationship they've ever been involved in: that the personality profiles were right. The fact is, Janey and Figgis — despite their good looks, their relative youth, their admirable if somewhat over-specific intellects — are both constitutionally incapable of sustaining a long-term friendship, let alone love. At times like this, I feel truly sorry for them, and sense more easily the desperation that has driven them here. Both double-divorcees, Janey and Figgis have been ejected from the present at least as thoroughly as poor old Woolley has. Perhaps they'd entertained thoughts of staying together, of using the chat show and media spin-off fees we're hoping to get when our college goes public to buy a proper house in a Sony enclave and recover custody of the children they've left in their turbulent wake....

Amazing, when you think about it, that we've lasted out this whole month together. But we have — just about. The profiles were right about that, too. Me, I'm simply glad that we're nearly at the end of it, and that the chances seem reasonably high that we'll return to home time.

"Your turn to drive, Woolley."

I blink my way back to the present.

"Okay, Woolley? You look like..." Janey glances back over her shoulder. The canhopper is on hover and she's human again. She smiles a human smile. "...I'd better not say."

Right, I think. Right.

I take the controls. All the dials are pointing toward the top — except for those dials that should be in the middle, which are in the middle, and those which aren't working at all or have been disconnected, which are limp, or blank. I ease the canhopper forward. Another couple of hours on the plateau for Janey to rest before the difficult bit. The ice rushes by, not as fast as before although Woolley does her Woolley best. I search left and right for the tracks left by Scott's men, but there is nothing. Even assuming they kept a course this straight on their return, the wind scours everything away.

The sun has dropped west, but I still need to keep the screen fairly dark. I can make out the faint reflection of Figgis and Janey behind me. I watch Figgis rest his hand on the inside of Janey's thigh. I concentrate on the driving.

Three Degree Depot flashes by a couple of hundred meters east. Flags and litter. I circle once at distance, but we decide not to stop. We're too afraid by now, too hurried, too eager. The sun slides closer to the ice at our backs, throwing huge shadows. Far ahead, something jagged breaks the flat horizon. The canhopper races on. Saw serrations become teeth, teeth become mountains. The sun sinks lower and reddens, daubing them with blood.

Janey yawns behind me. She says, "Move over, Woolley."

I slow the canhopper without argument. Janey settles into the pilot's seat. Figgis scratches his beard.

The Transantarctic Mountains rise and rise, damming the glacier of the Polar plateau. The ice starts to buckle into great ridges. We're sailing over the wreckage of a vast conflict. Janey has to climb hard on manual to get over and around the pressure faults. Looking out of the side window and down into the blue chasms is almost as bad as staring out of the porthole during a Jump. The canhopper's engines hiss with effort and I lever my arms for balance against the bulkhead.

Everything is huge...blood and shadow. Trying to ignore the part of my mind that insists on trying to give meaning to the shapes, I crane my neck up toward the mountain flanks where there are slashes of bare stone. Scott's men made special detours, just to take off their mittens and touch. In this desert of ice, I can understand why.

We pass into mountain shadow. It can't be possible, but I feel the chill.

Then out into a glare of light, too extreme for the screen's somewhat aged dimmers to cope with. Janey slows abruptly as she waits for the whiteout to settle. We're moving through a jagged gouge; it's too rough to be called a valley. The shadow blinks over us again. Bluish ice tumbles into squares that for a giddy instant could be the size of sugar cubes or the blocks God hewed to make the universe. Janey checks the readouts, draws back to a total crawl. Now that the engines are quietened, I can hear the patter of wind-driven ice striking the canhopper's fuselage.

Slow ahead. The canhopper crests a ridge. There's a glimpse of a far horizon, then another ridge, and my stomach drops into space beyond. The wind tips us like a kite but Janey's hands are three places at once, taking us down a magnetic slide. The Beardmore Glacier is below us, an immense fan of ice and moraine sloping out from the mountains. The land ends here but the ice carries on, the Great Shelf filling the bay of Ross Sea. My stomach settles and for a few moments I believe I can see the blue rim where the ocean finally begins, but that's 400 kilometers away and already the cloud directly below is thickening.

It closes over. We drift down the Ice Falls... Ghost ships lean from the coiling mist. There are cracks and chasms — it's a devil's stairway. I keep telling myself that five starving men have recently picked their way up and down this glacier and beyond. I can't believe it, not even when Janey slows to point out a discarded glove lying close to a crevasse. Figgis muses that maybe this is the place where Petty Officer Evans fell and nearly lost his life, even if there are grounds for supposing that the accident was dreamed up by Scott to provide an excuse for Evans's drift into insanity.

We pass the flags and the wreckage of Last Glacier Depot. I can sense desperation in those remains as Janey does a slow circuit. Shreds of torn canvas. The ice scuffed as though there was some kind of fight. A dented paraffin can rests a good twenty meters away; it's all too easy to imagine it being kicked or thrown there in anger when they find out that the extreme cold had leached its precious contents away. And Evans will be sulking and muttering to himself, ill and getting iller. And Scott remains aloof, perhaps already sensing what lies ahead; that his diary will be the only thing that matters. We're catching up on them now, both in time and distance. They were here twenty days ago: unbelievably, it's taken us just half a day in the canhopper to gain a whole month on them.

Everything is so real now. So close. Everything else we've done; all the research, all the secrecy, all the back room deals, all the delays, the endless planning, all the reassurances we've given ourselves that, despite the odd tiff and hiccup, things have been going pretty well; they count for nothing. Suddenly, we realize that we're approaching the only moment in this journey that ever mattered. Forget about fame and money and glory and science and history. Forget about the muffled arguments in the torpedo tubes and park bench dreams of whiteness, the endless wastes of half a dozen lost centuries. Forget about the hope of what we might or might not bring back to home time. We're simply very, very afraid.

Even allowing for the fact that the universe, at least in mathematical terms, seems to function just as well running backward as it does forward, time travel remains a paradox, a mystery. In many ways, we know little more about it than did the researchers who made that first tentative backward-nanosecond push a quarter of a century ago. Can you really assassinate Hitler, Napoleon, give an early warning to the residents of Pompeii, Hiroshima, Liverpool? The truth is that, in a sense, we still don't know.

Of course, time-travel research was instantly a hot property. Imagine! A bomb that arrives at its target before it's been fired! A strategic early warning computer that jumps backward to give itself time to issue commands! Better still, you can eliminate the commanders of pesky military rivals before they've been born! For a while, the possibilities seemed endless. But they were not.

The timeline we live within is somewhat elastic, and will seemingly accept the disruptions that the very presence of something like Epsilon will cause, but it is also extremely sensitive. Anything that might actually *change* things simply disappears with nothing more than a clap of returning air. That, at least, is the generally accepted theory. As, by the nature of these things, any time-disruptive jumps have simply failed to return, and have left no mark on history, there will always be room for doubt. It may be that the stored-up energy that the outraged meta-universe emits when confronted with an irreconcilable kink in time seeds a new big bang. Or it may be, as some optimists still assert, that those lost time-travelers and recording devices are still out there in some alternate

re-run of our world. But even the optimists have no answer to the question of how they can be deemed to have got there using time travel from a "future" that will no longer be their own. And the optimists haven't looked out of Epsilon's portholes during mid-Jump.

For all our hunger for the past, it seems that we can only peer under its very edges. And, for reasons that may have something to do with our penchant for recording and studying history, or possibly even the anthropic cosmological principle, it remains especially dangerous to tamper with the works of man. The very universe, it seems, resists. Thus it was that many international treaties and protocols were agreed, to be policed by watchdogs at least as powerful as those that oversaw the rampant proliferation of nuclear weapons in the previous century. The United Koreans, in particular, were more consistent in the breach than the observance. In view of their spectacular military and industrial success, it may be that they succeeded where others failed. But even they seem to have lost interest now. Time travel — at least in the sense that we once imagined it — is itself in danger of becoming history.

**F**IGGIS TAKES THE CONTROLS for a while as the canhopper slides away from the rubble of the glacier. Janey curls up in the seat beside me and snatches reluctantly at sleep. A storm blows up quickly, lying flat white across the screen one moment, then tunneling back and back the next. It looks unnervingly like the empty buzz that comes when you Jump.

The clock above the screen says 2:30 P.M. March 15, 1912. We have a big margin — there really is no need to push this hard — but we are caught up in the urgency of the chase, the need to get things done. Unbelievably, the storm gets worse. Janey takes over, and even she has to use the scanners. The green images flicker. I can see lips and faces, the star-skulls of Lovecraftian Old Ones. Gothic shrines to the wind. Faces in the playground shouting Stupid Ugly Woolley. I close my eyes....

After school, at what was also called home time in those days before the words were purloined, the other kids would stop taunting me when they saw my mother waiting on that bench beside the lake. In the winter, her big hands would be red and blue from the cold, and in the summer

there'd be rings of sweat under her arms, and her face would often be so wet that she looked as if she'd been crying. I'd sit down beside her, and she'd tell me about her day and then those stories of the Antarctic and all the other things I suppose most parents tell their kids. Like how she'd sat here on the first afternoon after she'd been inseminated at the clinic, and stared across the water and breathed the scents of fresh-cut municipal grass, ice cream vanilla, litter bins...

Those were some of the last good seasons in England. Summers that brought decent heat, autumns of mist where leaves fell from the living trees, winters of snow and frost. The last glimmers, as it turned out, of our country's wealth and glory. Across the lake on the hottest of days, lads in cutoff jeans dived laughing from the wooden pier. And, every year since Mum could remember, the cold undertow from the deep natural caverns would draw one of them down, and a body would be discovered days or weeks later bobbing in the lime pits on the far side of town. Mum being Mum, she sometimes tried to warn them of the risk they were taking. But they always just kept on laughing. They'd never listen.

Eventually, we'd make our way up the streets toward home. I'd hold Mum's hand and she was tall above me, and I'd think of Shackleton climbing that last mountain toward the whaling station, and of Scott, and of Captain Oates...

The biodetector at the bottom of the console gives a gentle bleep. I blink awake and lean forward. My spine goes cold. This is *much* too soon. Scott's men *can't* be here. I can almost feel the outraged universe preparing to spit us out with one simple cataclysmic heave. Then the rough shape of a cairn looms out of the ice storm, a cross and the ripple of a flag...

The canhopper circles and still the biodetector bleeps, unable or at least uncalibrated by its Korean makers to distinguish the frozen dead from the near-frozen living.

"Must be Evans," Figgis says. "Isn't anyone else it could be.... Pity we can't get a decent picture."

So this is the grave of Petty Officer Edgar Evans, who dreamed not of reaching the unattainable, but of retirement and a good pension from a grateful government, maybe enough cash to buy a pub down in some pretty part of Kent. His decline could have had something to do with a fall

on the Beardmore Glacier, but what medical evidence there is makes that unlikely. To Edwardians like Scott and his team, the initial signs of mental instability in a man such as Evans would have been a source of puzzled embarrassment. They would try to find a simple physical explanation. Scott had his own complex obsessions; he didn't realize that the simplest hopes are the ones that break most easily. And, although Evans was easily the biggest of the team, he had to make do on the same starvation rations as the others as they manhauled their sledges across the ice.

Janey turns the canhopper back on their trail. In a quiet moment that is probably the closest an old agnostic like me ever gets to prayer, I wonder how I can ever complain about having to put up with her and Figgis when the four men ahead of us have had to share Evans's last hours as he screamed and raved in their tent. And then I wonder—I simply can't help it—what death will feel like; that last push when I cross the final barrier. Will I know about it? Has it already happened?

At last.

We are close.

Janey is at the controls. Even she is keeping the speed down now. We're at the buzzing edges of the storm, with snatches of clarity between the flurries. Moving slow left and right over Scott's estimated course, she finds fresh sledge tracks, the scuff of wounded feet. She follows, keeping low. On the map display at her side, our course now wavers the same drunken line followed by the four men ahead.

It's exactly 1:30 P.M., Friday March 15 local time, when the biodetector starts to bleep. The range is just over three kilometers. The air is jagged crystal now as Janey pulls up the magnification on the detector's bearing. There are black specks against the white. Stooped. They don't seem to be moving...yet they are. Slowly. Janey matches the canhopper's motion to theirs, she increases the magnification again. The canhopper balances their distance, moving forward an agonized footstep at a time.

So that's it. Contact. We dare not move closer for now even with the canhopper's military camouflage. Janey clicks all the controls to Auto. Then her shoulders sag and she draws her hands over her face, rocking back and forth. Figgis is pulling at his beard. I can hear the soft snap as it comes out by the roots.

The afternoon is endless. The canhopper moves forward in tiny jerks. It's agony watching the image of Scott's men magnified against the whiteness, but none of us can look away. Amundsen got to the Pole with skis and dogs, but the British way had always been manhauling. Sure, Scott brought along dogs, but no one had been trained to use them. He brought ponies, which all died, much to the distress of Cavalry Captain Oates. He brought skis, which they didn't know how to use. And he brought three snazzy mechanical sledges, one of which fell through the ice, whilst the others broke down. At the end of the day, every British explorer knew that the Antarctic was about manhauling; a harness and a heavy sledge to pull. Even looking at them, I can't believe it. They've dragged themselves this way across 3,000 kilometers of ice. As Janey and Figgis and I stare out, the thought surely crosses all our minds that we should drift in closer, turn on the canhopper's lights, beckon these men over, feed them, give them warmth...This, I decide, must be how God feels: looking down, knowing that he cannot intervene.

With the engines almost at shutdown, I can hear the wind quicken, then decrease. Ghosts rise up from the ice, white on white. I'm too tired to think, and again I can see claws...ravenous eyes and teeth...faces pushed close and shouting...a park bench...

One of the four men ahead is obviously in greater pain than the others. It's difficult to watch any of them, but with Captain Oates, it actually hurts. He doesn't walk — it's an inhuman shuffle, something out of a monster comic book. He falls behind. After a while, Scott, Bowers and Wilson droop their limbs and loosen their harnesses as they wait for him to catch up. Eventually, he does, but soon he falls behind again. Oates is suffering from scurvy, which was still the scourge of polar explorers at the start of the last century. One of the diseases's many unpleasant characteristics is that it unknits old wounds. His thigh was shattered by a sniper's bullet during the Boer War: by now, the scar tissue will have dissolved.

I watch as he falls behind once more. There can't be any doubt amongst them that their chances of survival are thinning by the hour. Scott has already called Oates "a terrible burden" in his diary. But not for much longer. For today is March 15, 1912, when Captain Lawrence Edward Grace Oates finally walks out of history — and into legend.

Evening of a sort. With Oates still shuffling far behind, the others

begin to put up the tent. It takes a long time and there are fresh ice flurries coming from the east. Clumsy fingers. Clumsy minds. None of them seem inclined to take a piss before they go in; they'll be dehydrated as well. Or maybe they've given up caring. They close the tent. Oates finally gets there too. There's an odd sort of pantomime before they let him in.

Janey rests the canhopper on the ice for an hour. None of us is hungry, but we eat, guessing that the men inside the tent are doing the same, sharing out the frozen crumbs of their few remaining rations. We have hot soup, crackers, a chocolate bar each. The wind howls. After an hour and no sign of further activity, Janey starts up the canhopper again and drifts in much closer. Down from two kilometers to one, then five hundred meters...four...three...two...one hundred. Then fifty. She uses the screen projection and the biodetector to make sense of the storm, but now that we are this close, the tent, the skis and the sledges are clearly visible through the streaming white. Janey kills the canhopper's engines. In the sudden silence I can hear the rattle of ice against the fuselage...and canvas fluttering...

We all dress awkwardly in our outsuits and move the litter of the journey away from the canhopper's outer door in case anything should get blown out. It's uncomfortable in all this thick padding, but we dare not be anything but fully ready now. We wait. Wilson — the doctor in the party — has given Oates a heavy dose of morphine. They all hoped without saying that it would finish him off.

The storm is unnerving graywhite static. Any time now. We wait. The storm quietens a little. The midnight sun flickers gold. Just as the drift ice begins to sweep over again, the side of the tent flutters oddly. For a moment, I think it's just a twist of the wind, but then I see it jerk again. There's no doubt that the laces of the outer flap are being pulled. A head appears. We watch without a word. Janey's gloved hand circles the canhopper's door release.

Oates falls out from the tent on hands and knees, his head down between his shoulders. Behind him, the ties jerk as someone pulls them shut again. He crawls forward without looking up, makes an effort at standing, fails as his right leg shoots out at an agonizing angle. He's dragging something behind him. I can't exactly make it out through the storm, but I know from the records that he's taken his sleeping bag and

boots out there with him. Neither would be any use to him, but at the very least it must have been plain to the others what Oates was doing.

Still, we wait. It could take several hours for him to die, and it was decided long ago that we should wait for him to get at least twenty meters from the tent. But he's moving so slowly. He keeps standing up...falling over. He looks drunk — maybe the morphine has affected him. After about twelve meters, I put up the hood of my outsuit and say *Let's Go* in a shout that comes out as a whisper. Janey pushes the release. The Antarctic storm roars in.

I climb down the steps from the canhopper. Swaying against the wind, I unclip the syringe gun from my belt. My body is screaming hurry hurry, but the last thing we dare risk is one of us sustaining an injury. I take my bearings as Figgis and Janey back out with the stretcher. Oates still has his head down. The screaming wind is masking whatever noise we are making. He still hasn't seen us or the canhopper.

We push forward toward Oates and the tent. They've stacked their gear on the far side to act as a feeble windbreak, so at least we don't have to worry about tripping over a sledge or damaging something. Figgis has a flashlight on the shoulder of his outsuit. The idiot turns it on, and I signal wildly to him through the blizzard, too excited to think about using the comms set. The tunnel of light, if it caught directly on the tent's filthy weave, would shine straight through. Janey gets the message, and reaches to turn the thing off herself. Still, Oates is crawling, the ties of the sleeping bag looped around his trailing injured foot, his hands wedged up inside the reindeer skin finnesko boots for leverage. And the world is still here. The ties of the universe haven't broken. And Oates hasn't seen us.

I push on into the storm. Half my mind is still on that tent and the three men inside it who belong, untouched by us, in history. Now, Oates looks up, his hands still pushed into the boots like clumsy mittens. I'm three meters from him. I raise the syringe gun to quieten him, expecting him to yell or struggle; seeing the three of us coming out of this storm must surely feel like one last nightmare on top of every other. His face is blotched red and white inside the porthole of his balaclava, puffed beyond all normal expression. Maybe it's that or snowblindness, but I can sense no surprise. Reluctant to use the gun unless I have to, I bend forward, holding out my hand. I know it's absurd, but I'm smiling under my mask.

Hi, we're from the future. Please keep quiet. For God's sake don't take us to your leader.

I get a whiff of him even through my mask and the storm. Gangrene. I grab at the cloth covering his shoulders. It's half-rotten and starts to break up in my hands, but Figgis and Janey have got the message and are moving quickly to the left. Oates looks straight up at me. Maybe it's just the pain, but I get a cold feeling of recognition. He moans something. It's far too quiet to be heard over this storm, but to me it sounds like make the most of. Time. Home. Hurry. Something like that. Now I give him the syringe gun. His body has no strength. He goes loose instantly.

Janey and Figgis lay the stretcher on the hissing ice. The three of us roll Oates onto it. We can't take any risks. Figgis untangles the sleeping bag before we lift the stretcher up. He has to use his bare hands, and Janey grabs one of his gloves just before the wind spins it off into the storm.

We lift the stretcher, and, as we do so, the boot comes away from Oates's right hand. This time, I remember the comms set.

"Remember," my voice crackles loud in my own head. "They found the sleeping bag and the *right* boot."

Figgis gives what could be a thumbs up. As we back away toward the open door of the canhopper, the boot and the loose sleeping bag start to tumble east, where they will be discovered next spring by Surgeon Atkinson's party after they have found Scott and the others dead in their tent just the few extra kilometers they managed to drag themselves down the trail.

It takes a million times longer than it should for us to haul the stretcher up inside the canhopper. I have to keep telling myself that what we're doing is already part of history. Oates is safe. Nothing has changed. This is the exactly what always happened, right down to that boot and that sleeping bag tumbling off in the terrible wind. The body of Captain Lawrence Oates was never found. Never was and never will be. *We* were here. *We* took him. We've always been part of history.

The door swings in on silence. The ice swirls confetti, settles on the canhopper's plastic floor. It's still freezing in here and our breath is pluming clouds, but already the heaters are starting to whirl, already Janey is sliding into the pilot seat, slamming on the engines. Already we are on our way.

Figgis helps me settle the stretcher into the supports behind our seats. Janey's pushing the canhopper ridiculously hard. I rip off my mask and yell at her to cool it. Steadying myself with one hand, I tear the wrapper off a steel and cut through layers of hood and balaclava. I have to remind myself that there really is a human being underneath this mess.

I ease the boot away from his left arm. Oates has slit the reindeer skin down as far as the toes so that he can get it on and off his swollen foot. But something else looks odd about it. There isn't time to think now, but my mind tells me anyway just as I drop the soggy weight to the floor. It's his left arm, but this is *the right boot*. I glance back at Figgis and Janey. They are too busy for anything right at this moment. I say nothing.

He needs oxygen. I turn up the supply and hold it above his face without touching the seared flesh. One breath. Two. Easy now. Then I take a whiff myself. The smell of Oates gets worse as I slice away more layers. I have to keep the overhead heaters on full to bring his body temperature up fast and the flesh and the rags — sometimes it's hard to be quite sure which is which — are starting to warm.

Oates's hands are swollen tight, the skin and nails peeled back like old paint on a fence. I drag my suddenly sweating body from the outsuit and work in underwear — hardly sterile conditions, and God knows what Captain Oates is going to think if he wakes up now. But Oates is barely alive. The shock of us and the stretcher and the syringe gun can't have helped. The blood analysis is up on the screen. It tells me that Wilson gave Oates a lot more morphine than anyone back at our college had predicted. I can't imagine what power it was that moved him across the ice.

I take another hit of oxygen before I start work on the legs. This is the worst bit. I already know what I'll find from the smell of rotting meat, but that doesn't make it any easier. The right leggings are swollen taut from the thigh to the feet. I tease apart a seam and start to cut down and through. The flesh is white...blue...red...black...green....It spills out like weak jelly. I cut further. Bits of bone jut up. Just as I reach the knee, Captain Oates's eyes snap open. I wonder if the morphine has somehow nullified my own injection before I notice the screen and realize that this is the characteristic spasm that begins seconds before the heart stops beating.

I jam open his mouth and slam the electrodes onto his wasted chest.

Bits of flesh flake away and I snap some bones in my hurry. I'm shouting for help and even Janey must have sensed the sudden urgency because she's brought the canhopper back to float. Figgis knows enough to hold the oxygen over Oates's mouth and otherwise keep out of my way as the body jerks and shudders with each shock. After the initial panic, I work smoothly. Apart from the mess Oates is in, it's textbook stuff. But the body gets looser and harder and the moment comes that has nothing to do with clinical judgment or the flat traces on the screen when I know there isn't anything left to fight.

History was right.

Captain Oates died in the Antarctic.

**C** LIMBING THROUGH RUINED CITIES of the ice pack and the Beardmore Glacier, the air inside the canhopper is appalling. The improvised body bag isn't much help, and the lowest temperature I can get Oates down to is 3°C. Planning on bringing a live passenger back to Epsilon, we left all the cryogenic stuff back in the medical bay. He'll keep, of course, but that isn't really the point.

So this is it. The end, really, of everything. The whole point of our journey was this one big gamble, of doing what no one else had ever done and bringing a live human being back to our home time. The idea was daring, perfect. Not only that, but it would be Captain Oates! Our college would be rich again! The research grants would pour in! We'd get paid regularly! We could even start taking in students! It wouldn't matter then that the loans for the project were secured by dubious means, that we're breaking national law and international treaty. The glory, the fame, would eclipse any problems. All of England, all of Britain — Europe, even, as a whole — would stir from its poverty. Fearful and amazed Oriental eyes would turn toward us once again.

Flags of ice and cloud drift over the golden peaks. Janey hogs the canhopper's controls. Figgis breathes through his fingers. No one says a word. No one needs to; our failure is there in the blackened ruin fermenting behind us, it's there in every sickening breath. I can't sleep, and find it hard to even close my eyes. When I do, I get the feeling that the darkly reproachful ghost of the dead Captain is standing beside me.

The sensors finally detect Epsilon up ahead. Janey makes an uncharacteristic botch of docking the canhopper, giving the outer bay a dent. She curses. Figgis and I exchange hollow glances; there'll be an inquest about that when we get back to home time. Now that we're returning with a corpse, there'll be an inquest about everything.

In the medical bay, I finish off doing the things I should have done inside the canhopper. No point in actually tidying Captain Oates up, of course. Now that he's just an archaeological relic, the specialists will squeal if I do so much as wipe his diarrhetic arse. Looked at from this angle, old Doctor Woolley here has already done a lot of damage trying to save his life. They'll want every ounce of dirt, every drop of the fluid that is pattering through the stretcher to the floor. All of it will be worth something, and will help defray our costs. But a few preparations are necessary before I freeze him.

I've got a mask on, but the gas Oates is giving off is still enough to sting my eyes. Graywhite slashes of his body peek out through what my steels and the Antarctic have done to his clothing. The flesh over the ribcage looks like it's under suction, the arms belong on a burnt chicken. Only the penis and the bluish scrotum look anything like they should, jutting with jaunty irrelevance from a nest of hair. As I take a couple of blood samples (watery pink from the neck, clotted purple from the shriveled buttocks) to determine the exact stage of decay, Oates's narrow deepset eyes stare at me. His teeth are clenched, the wide lips drawn back through the beard like a grin. This sort of thing never used to bother Woolley when she did pathology, but that's many years off, and far away from here.

Talking to the eyes of the cameras, I give him the necessary jabs to slow the formation of damaging ice crystals in the cells, one for each portion of each limb. Just like pricking a turkey for the oven, as my old pathology professor used to say. Then I stretch out the protective film, lock in the pumps and the cables. The film shrivels over him like shrinkwrap on cheese, pushing the bloated hands flat, smoothing the face and widening the eyes, catching the penis at a funny angle, leaving it sticking up like a tiny monument. I feel the cold breath on my skin. Goodbye, Captain Oates. The ice got you after all.

Janey's torpedo tube is open and empty; Figgis's is closed. As I flop down inside my own, I hear the fall of their voices over the faint scream

of the wind. Sounds like Woolley this and Woolley that, but that's probably my paranoia. I did my best — I've been over it all a thousand times already. The one question mark hangs over the syringe gun, and the College experts had agreed that there was a margin of safety with Oates's probable level of morphine.

But I can't help wondering....

I see Oates's face staring out at me out from the balaclava. His lips moved, shaping words that were like time, home, move, hurry, love; something like that. Even then, I don't think I panicked. It just felt for a moment as if he understood, as if he had gone out of the tent expecting to be rescued. But that's impossible. So no (I'll tell the inevitable inquiries), I don't think Doctor Woolley panicked. No way.

When I awake in my torpedo tube, silence has frozen over Epsilon, settled soft and heavy. I climb out and stumble around the plastic floors in plimsolls and an old football jersey. I stow away the clean washing. I tidy up in the kitchen area. I wipe down the floors with disinfectant that smells like a forest of plastic Christmas trees. Everything is faintly but sickeningly pervaded by the smell of Oates, but I get childish satisfaction from putting things back where they belong, as if I'm making some kind of point about the state of this expedition. Stupid really, but I'd imagined that people would look at Woolley differently after Epsilon. Yes, Woolley had been kidding herself, just like Janey and Figgis. The only difference was, I didn't even realize I was doing so.

Epsilon needs to be clean and tidy. I don't want people to get the impression that we've let things slip when we jump to home time. In the comms bay, I peel off Figgis's postcard of Interlaken. Beyond the portholes, I see that snow is falling, rare as rain in a desert. I smile as I look out, watching it flutter at the glass, dancing in graceful drifts. Then, suddenly, it's gone. Absolutely nothing takes its place.

Four hours later, Janey and Figgis and I are talking in that slow way that finally comes when your panic glands run dry. The air inside Epsilon is growing warmer and the smell of Oates seems to be getting worse — or maybe it's just us. They both thought Woolley had finally flipped when I hauled them out of their torpedo tube. I got a grim kind of satisfaction out of showing them the empty buzz beyond the portholes, but that soon

passed as Janey started to hug herself and say, So What Do We Do Now until the question became a meaningless sound.

She's calm as any of us are now after the jab I gave her and sits at the kitchen table with her arms folded tight. Emptiness surges at the triple glass behind her back. We're no longer in the Antarctic. We're no longer anywhere. I wish we could put some kind of curtain up over the porthole, but the idea seems comically domestic.

"There was no power surge, so this has nothing to do with Epsilon's own Jump engines," says Figgis, walking his fingers toward us across the table, then walking them back again. "It looks as though some natural force had intervened between us and, well, reality. Of course," his fingers reach up to his beard, "I could be wildly wrong."

Behind us, the buzz goes on and on. It seems both dense and fragile. You keep expecting it to roar. There isn't any sound.

I decide to tell them about the mix-up with Oates's left and right boots. For once, they don't bother to argue. Any explanation is better than none at all. That, or something else we've overlooked, must have been enough for the universe to reject us as foreign matter.

It seems as if the non-state out there is slowly eating away at Epsilon. The electronic filters in the porthole glass are weakening, and there are signs that the outer coatings of camouflage are breaking up.

"There *has* to be a chance," Janey says as the angry grayish light-that-isn't-light flickers. "Otherwise we'd be dead already. So if the computer could work out a pattern, we could probably Jump back to home time...maybe not to England, but at least to the Antarctic. Then, we just get in the canhopper and aim for the coast. You know what it's like there. We'd soon come across a mine or a rig or a garbage tanker."

"Are the sensors still working?" I ask.

Figgis shrugs. "They're not broken. But there's nothing out there to record. There isn't even a vacuum.... I mean, if there was, Epsilon would simply have burst. But I think Janey's right. We have to jump. What else can we do?"

Janey nods, the movement notched by the trembling of her head. "That has to be it."

"How can we Jump when we don't know where we are?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

"I have a simpler one," I say. "We could just step outside."

- Figgis and Janey stare at me. Now they know I'm mad.

"Like Captain Oates," I add.

"Jesus," Figgis whispers, "you mean you're expecting to be *rescued*?"

The sweat down my back feels cold even though the air is getting warmer by the minute. Epsilon generates heat — heat that it's designed to radiate into an atmosphere. But now there is no atmosphere, and the outer skin is getting warmer and warmer as it corrodes. We can't turn off the life supports, and even if we did, there would still be the heat the three of us are generating. I wonder how long it will take for poor old Oates to thaw...but we'd all be long dead by then.

"Look," Figgis says, "if you want to asphyxiate or fry or implode whatever else would happen outside, that's fine by me, Woolley, but don't expect us to follow. If we can time things right we might as well try a Jump..." His voice trails off uncertainly. I think he genuinely hadn't realized until that moment that we're really not discussing means of escape, but ways of ending our lives.

"If you want to get back to home time that badly..." I say, "...and assuming you'd recognize what you found."

"It's *home*." Janey grins and shivers.

Out of the window, I think for a moment that I glimpse something. But it's just Woolley's mind playing tricks, imposing order on chaos. It's just more static, more nothingness. On and on. It's a creepy sensation, like gazing into the eyes of God. I have to look away.

"Will you let me go?" I ask.

But Janey and Figgis are staring at each other. Figgis has already got the impossible equations of the Jump blurring his eyes and Janey's white and eager. They don't stand a chance, but then neither do I. That's our only hope.

I leave them and head for the medical bay, where a faint mist rises from the famous Captain Oates. Death and freezing have smoothed the suffering from his face. Under the grime and the beard, he's even faintly good-looking. The sort of large, deep-set features that look terrible on a woman, good on a man.

There's no porthole in here, but part of me can feel the emptiness outside anyway: it's there at the back of my jaw like the pain of wisdom

teeth and beneath my fingernails, it's in the places where blood and bone corrode. The lights are dimming as the life support struggles to keep up. How funny, after the frozen Antarctic, that the most immediate threat to our lives is this increasing heat.

For now, Oates is still solid as a brick, looking up at me with unwavering pearly eyes. Even my old pathology professor would have to admit I've done a good job on him; pity no one's ever going to see it. Still, Woolley tells herself, there's always a chance. Everything you do in life is a race against death and time, so why should this be any different?

I open a fresh steel. Fortunately, Oates's legs are spread wide enough for me to make a rough incision in the perineum below the scrotum. Through the film, into the frosty flesh. Crude stuff, but I'm not doing any damage to the cells that matter. It takes another steel to work my way up, avoiding the ridge of the pelvis. The sartorius, the vas deferens, the symphysis pubis...I'm sweating rivers but my hands are cold and clumsy. I slice through the woven scrap of a label. *Burberry Mills — Empire Cotton — Size 34M.*

The steel is blunting again. As I peel the scrotal sack away in its entirety, the frozen penis snaps like...like, well, a frozen penis. I let the whole lot clang into a bucket. Contrary to popular belief, whilst sperm are manufactured in the testicles, the live ones are stored in the seminal vesicle at the base of the bladder prior to ejaculation. It's that and the icy pink stone of the prostate below it that I eventually extract.

I have to be careful thawing the fluid, and even then I need to thin it out with plasma. Rather than chance the artificial stuff we have in store, I centrifuge a little out from my own blood, and then centrifuge the mixture again, to concentrate what little there is of Captain Oates's semen. Everything takes an age. Human reproduction is a messy process at the best of times, even when it doesn't involve a frozen and malnourished corpse. Messy — and chancy. But Mother Nature's profligate with her resources — even here, in this no-place. I risk the couple of extra minutes it takes to get a quick sample under the microscope, and I can't help smiling as I watch the meager few tens of millions of living sperm I've managed to filter jostle on the console screen. It's against all the odds, really, to have got even this far.

So at least there's a faint chance. I know I've hurried the thaw, and I've

hardly stuck to professional clinical standards, but maybe if you break enough rules the odds eventually start to tumble back in your favor. I half expect Janey and Figgis to walk in just at the most embarrassing moment, but it doesn't happen. The medical bay hatch stays gloriously shut.

My hands are trembling and the syringe feels a whole lot bigger than it should. And cold; like most doctors, Woolley doesn't spare much thought for the patient, least of all when it's herself. I draw in a shivering breath. But, pushing the syringe, I feel nothing at all. Not even lonely or afraid.

I'm sure the textbooks would say that I should lie down now with some soothing music. But even if all that were possible, I'm too keyed up. I just drop the junk into the chute and feel the heat of Epsilon break over me in a sudden wave. You had it easy, Mum, wandering though the glass doors at whatever clinic it was that you went to. The odds against conception must be phenomenal. But then, they always are — and I want to take something with me when I step out from Epsilon.

Figgis and Janey are still in the comms bay. They're sitting at the console, but their eyes are on Woolley as she clammers through the hatch. The screen on the right of Figgis glitters with some weird kind of graph — doubtless something to reassure them when they finally find the courage to jump — but the one on the left displays a fisheye view of the medical bay, where Oates's body lies with a half-thawed hole where the genitals should be. Of course — the *cameras*. Woolley was too busy worrying and watching the hatch to think straight. Should I need it, the look on their faces is confirmation that they've seen everything.

Incredibly, I find myself blushing. My dry throat clicks open and shut as I try to pull out some words. I give up with a kind of shrug; I just don't know what to say.

"What *are* you doing?" Janey finally asks, the buzz from the porthole behind her face seeming to swarm in around us.

I'm still dressed in my old football jersey and plimsolls. Worry and lack of sleep won't have done much to improve my looks either, and I get the impression that if Woolley takes too many steps toward Janey and Figgis they'll cringe or run away. Perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad idea to chase them, get an idea of how the alien felt in all those old movies set in places like this. Me and Mum, we always used to root for the monster.

"We're, er..." Figgis makes a clumsy wave toward his graph "We're working out the probabilities. This can't be entirely *nowhere*. For a start, there's the erosion of Epsilon's outer surface. That's happening at a measurable rate, which means that it must be governed by the some sort of external law. I think we've got a chance."

"Yeah," Janey nods. "We've got to risk it. You're not still thinking of, ah..." She pauses and studies her ragged fingernails for a moment "Just going through the hatch?"

Neither of them can look at me. But I can feel their thoughts fluttering against my face like hot breath. They *want* me to go outside. Even if I didn't feel this odd compulsion, their pressure might almost be enough. All it takes is a few steps. I look longingly at the handle of the inner hatch, but some instinct still holds me back. I have to say something...maybe words about time, hurry, home, not much. That kind of thing.

I clear my throat. It comes out as a phlegmy bark. I wipe my lips. For a moment, I thought I'd finally got to those words that Mum spoke to me when she came through the swing doors of that hospital corridor. But perhaps that's too much to hope for.

"I'm going outside for a while," I croak. "I may be some time."

It seems faintly illogical to go out dressed in a sleep-stained football jersey, but even more illogical to use an outsuit. My feet carry me. The inner hatch swings back without my realizing I've pushed the handle. Then it closes behind me. No conscious action seems to be involved anymore, which is a good thing because I'm not sure that I have the courage to go on. Silence buzzes beyond the porthole. Oates is a gray wraith at my shoulder in this tight space between inside and out; it seems as if it's his hand that turns on the inner seal, even though part of me knows that it's probably Figgis doing it on remote from the comms bay, making sure that stupid ugly Woolley doesn't let the emptiness blast in.

Without thinking, I brace myself for a chill. But of course it doesn't happen. As the outer door swings out, it seems to turn some kind of corner and I lose sight of it entirely. The air stays put, neither drawn out nor compressed by whatever lies beyond. I understand more clearly now that there is no light out there, there's nothing that my senses can truly relate to. It's a bit like standing over a drop, looking down from the high board at the swimming pool. And then it's like nothing at all. There are colors

there if I want to see them, shapes and sneering faces from the playground pushed close just before home time. Stupid Ugly Woolley. Everything tilts up and I feel myself sliding. Oates is a black mist that curls around me, some sort of atmospheric effect. I draw in one last breath. Then I let go.

I feel a rush, sparks in my eyes. It really is like the swimming pool, like diving, like falling asleep. I can hardly believe that it takes this long for my brain to dissolve; that I still have time for this particular thought. Then that I have time for this next one. The clinical part of me is amazed. There's even still a faint sensation of falling. Who'd have ever thought that death would be this *interesting*? Woolley should have done it instead of Osteoporosis Fractures for her thesis. But it's too late for all that now.

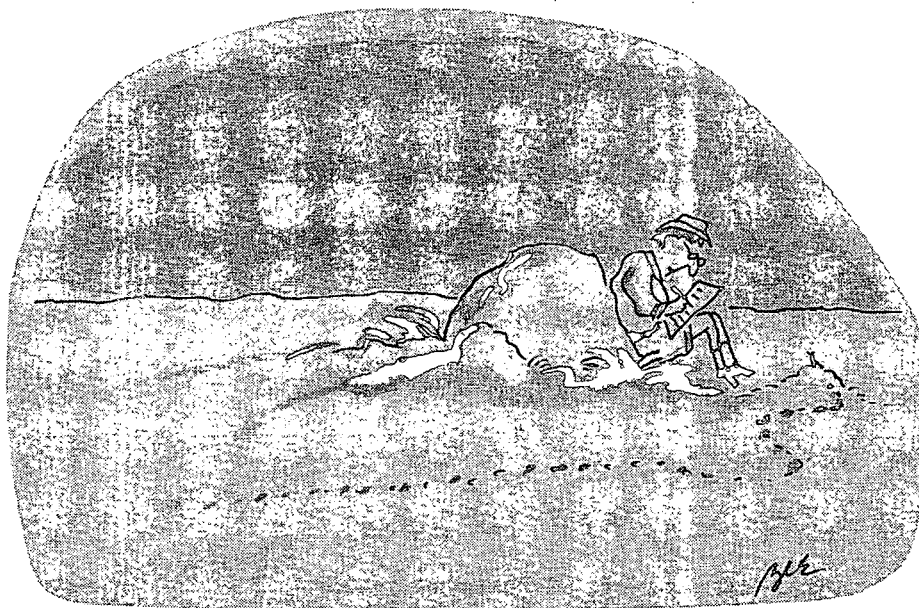
Then there's a jolt of pain. It's localized, my right leg. Feels like striking...something solid. I wait for the pain to spread. Bang. My other leg. Jesus, it hurts the way it does when you walk into something; a sharp reminder from your body to look where you're going. Then the palms of my hand slide across something sharp, they go hot and wet. Blood. Fingers to my mouth taste salt, my tongue touches...gravel. I pull in a breath that fills with the scent of litter bins and water, of fresh-cut municipal grass. For a moment, it feels as though hands other than my own are helping me up. But then they are gone. I open my eyes alone.

Hauling myself onto the bench, I look around through the green blotches in my eyes. It's a hot day. People are flirting with a benign sun. There's a little girl down the path staring, a Mr. Whippy ice cream dripping down her knuckles. Her mother takes one look at me and pulls her away. Woolley's still in this stained football jersey, but at least it's summer. People will just think I'm one of the local nutters.

Across the squinting water, lads in singlets are splashing and diving into the lake from the short wooden pier. It's so hot, I almost want to join them. And there's another part of me wants to go over and shout, wag my finger, tell them about the boys from other summers who drowned, were drawn down by the cold undertow to re-emerge in the lime pits miles outside town. But I just watch them and smile. And I feel this honeyed sunlight. Eventually, it's home time, when the younger children break out from school. They glance uneasily at this funny-looking woman as they run and chatter on their way to their old TVs and their dinners and their future lives. I smile, frightening them by doing so.

Evening starts to grow. Streetlight trickles across the water. The park keeper stares. I realize that I must have been sitting here for a long time; relaxing, doing almost what the fertility manuals would recommend. But conception's a tricky process. It could still be hours ahead — or never. That's a chance I'll have to take.

As I walk up the streets toward my home, I start to wonder if I ever really left it that morning. After all, there are still a great many things that I don't understand. Of course, there's hope now there's time, there's time now there's hope. At least twelve happy years lie between me and that morning at the hospital, coming through the swing doors with the results of the biopsy buzzing in my head to find little Woolley swinging her legs on that itchy seat, looking happy, bored, uncertain as she waits for her mother. I'll have to talk to her, express something about hope, love, home, time, make the most; something like that. I have no idea what it is. But when the time comes, I think I'll know what to say. ♪



*"Day 573 of the project: Let's just say there are many, many, many, many ants and leave it at that."*



# BOOKS TO LOOK FOR

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## CHARLES DE LINT

*The Bear Comes Home*, by Rafi Zabor, W.W. Norton & Co., 1997, \$25.

IF YOU WERE reading my column around this time last year, you'll remember my waxing enthusiastic over *The Bear Went over the Mountain* by William Kotzwinkle, a delightful mockery of the officiousness that claims much of the literary world. Through his bear protagonist Hal Jam and the novel Jam had "written," Kotzwinkle poked fun at authors, agents, editors, publishers, critics, and academics alike.

Well, Rafi Zabor's *The Bear Comes Home* also features a bear as protagonist, and offers up some pointed criticism of another established art/entertainment industry (in this case, the music world), but there the similarity ends. Where Kotzwinkle took a light-hearted approach that left one gasping with

laughter, Zabor approaches the matter much more seriously, though no less effectively.

The Bear in Zabor's novel comes from a long line of circus bears who have hidden their intelligence from humankind until the Bear's soon-to-be keeper and friend Jones wins him in a card game as a cub. Living in Jones's apartment, the Bear reads voraciously when Jones is out and about, listens to Jones's extensive jazz collection, and even takes up playing a clarinet he finds in the closet, though he knows it's not quite his instrument. When he finally reveals his intelligence to Jones, the first thing he does is get Jones to buy him an alto sax.

When the novel opens, the two are plying a circus bear act on the streets of New York City, but the Bear has larger ambitions. He wants to play jazz on stage. His first real gig ends in disaster, leaving the Bear incarcerated over a long winter, but upon his escape, his life begins to look up. He gets a recording contract,

starts a tour, and even meets the woman of his dreams.

But this is a philosophical bear, as well as a musical one, and for every good thing that happens to him, he can't shake, or come to terms with, his "outsider" status. Much of the book is taken up with his attempts at fitting into a human world. In lesser hands, the philosophical thrust of the narrative could easily have bogged the novel down into unreadability, but Zabor proves to be an excellent, even lyrical, author, and the metaphysical concerns provide as much of a page-turning impetus here as might the high action events of a thriller.

Zabor also knows his jazz, inside and out. From guest appearances by the likes of Charlie Haden, the constant referencing of the giants in the field, and Zabor's sharp insight into the music industry, the novel rings true. What particularly fascinated me was how ably he's managed to capture the sound of music with only words on the written page — especially his ability to translate the process of improvisation so that it not only makes sense, but excites one almost as much as listening to the real thing.

If Zabor could find the musicians to play the music the way he describes it here, he'd have a bril-

liant soundtrack to accompany this fascinating novel. Only where do you find a player who can take the best of Bird, Coltrane, Jackie McLean, and Ornette Coleman, and still have his own voice?

But perhaps Zabor's greatest accomplishment is how quickly he makes us forget the implausibility of the Bear's existence in the first place. He gives us neither a cute talking animal, nor simply an anthropomorphized bear, but a fully realized character who just happens to be a bear, a creature, similar to us in enough ways that we may empathize with him, but who, in the end, will remain forever alien.

A word of warning: if graphic depictions of an interspecies love affair would offend you, you'll want to avoid this novel.

*Think Like a Dinosaur and Other Stories*, by James Patrick Kelly, Golden Gryphon Press, 1997, \$22.95.

Arkham House is one of the oldest and best specialty press publishing houses, and for many years James Turner was its editor. Now Turner has started up his own imprint, Golden Gryphon Press, concentrating on short story collections such as the book in hand, and utilizing

the same high quality paper, design, and binding that have long made Arkham House books such lovely treasures to read and own.

For the press's first book, Turner couldn't have done better than choosing a collection by James Patrick Kelly. Kelly's short fiction ranks among the very best the field has to offer, and if you have any doubts, the material collected here is proof positive. Kelly doesn't ring one false note with these novelllettes and stories, and his palette is varied. There's the hard sf of the 1996 Hugo winner "Think Like a Dinosaur" and the socio-political sf of "Standing in Line with Mister Jimmy"; the sensitive contemporary fantasy of "Dancing with the Chairs" and "Faith"; the pure weirdness of "The First Law of Thermodynamics" and the post-holocaust sf of "Crow."

The "voice" of the narrative is invariably suited to the story — sometimes tough, sometimes tender, always polished — while his characters live and breathe from the moment of their first appearance. A collection such as this is a pure treasure trove for those of us who love short fiction for it gives us in one book the best the field has to offer: thoughtful, well-crafted stories that enlighten, disturb, and fill

us with wonder. What's so refreshing, in these days of specialization, is that all these varied voices have their origin in the same author's mind. Highly recommended.

If you can't find *Think Like a Dinosaur* in your local book store, Golden Gryphon Press is distributed by Independent Publishers Group, 814 North Franklin Street, Chicago, IL 60610.

*Steel Rose*, by Kara Dalkey, ROC Books, 1997, \$5.99

Many writers who transpose the folklore of faerie mythology to a contemporary setting inevitably get it wrong — if they don't muddle the facts, then they don't capture the spirit. But Kara Dalkey doesn't stumble with either in her latest novel.

*Steel Rose* opens with Pittsburgh performance artist T.J. Kaminski working on a new act and accidentally summoning up a couple of tommyknockers who offer to help her out. But, of course, bargains struck with faerie are never what they seem. At first the pair help her put together a new piece of performance art that's a rousing success, but they have their own agenda, and before T.J. knows it, she's stuck in the middle of a war

between the two courts of Faerie — the Seelie and Unseelie Courts — and her personal life and problems are forced onto a back burner.

So far, not much new. Besides its use in the old fairy tales that provide the novel's source material, this theme has cropped up in any number of contemporary fantasy novels. But Dalkey does a number of things right: her novel retains the rollicking fun of the old tales while managing to maintain a serious edge of danger in amongst the light-hearted aspects. More happily, she doesn't take sides. There are good and bad aspects to both the Sidhe of the Seelie Court, the tall noble elves of the deep forest found in both Shakespeare and Tolkien, and the "working class" element of the Unseelie Court, the trolls and hobs and knockers and the like. This isn't one more cosmic struggle between Good and Evil, or even Order and Chaos, but rather one more battle in an incomprehensible — to human ways of thinking — eternal struggle in which neither

side is wholly right or wrong.

The only tricky part is that Dalkey's first person protagonist T.J. is a shy, introverted, rather desperate, and somewhat self-centered sort of a person. Such a character isn't the easiest to pull off, and frankly there were times when she was annoying, rather than sympathetic. But mostly this is an entertaining, fast-paced novel that combines both the magic and headlong fun of an old fairy tale with a contemporary setting and sensibility, and the good parts far outweigh T.J.'s occasional lapses into navel-gazing.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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# BOOKS

## ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

*To Say Nothing of the Dog*, by  
Connie Willis, Bantam Spectra,  
1997, \$23.95

*Days of Cain*, by J. R. Dunn,  
Avon, 1997, \$23

*Three in Time: Classic Novels  
of Time Travel*, by Chad Oliver,  
Wilson Tucker, and Poul Ander-  
son, White Wolf/Borealis, 1997,  
\$14.99

**N**OT LONG ago, Jeanne Calment, the French woman widely recognized as the oldest living human being, died at the age of 122. She was born in 1875, a time before telephones, radio, movies, computers, nuclear warheads, cars, airplanes, and just about everything else we associate with modern times, and yet she lived to see it all — the Somme and Hiroshima, the Moon landing and the fall of the Berlin wall. In one human lifetime

(albeit an extraordinarily long one), the world has changed more than it had in all of human history.

It's no wonder then that we're a culture obsessed with the passage of time. We live our lives by clocks and calendars, and we divide our histories — personal and communal — into ever-smaller segments: our late teens, early thirties, and mid-fifties; the '40s, '60s, and late-'80s. This seems so natural to us now that it's hard to believe people haven't always been so fixated on time — indeed, that it's only in that same span of Mme. Calment's life that the almighty clock has come to regulate every aspect of our lives. And, not coincidentally, it's during that period that the science-fictional concept of time travel has become one of the most familiar literary devices in or out of the genre.

One of the reasons for the ubiquity of time-travel stories is their adaptability; the theme can be used in the service of many different points of view, for many different

purposes, and the best time travel stories employ the device in a way that captures something essential about the particular time in which they're written. Connie-Willis's latest novel, *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, is that kind of book. She takes us again to 21st-century Oxford — the setting of her Hugo and Nebula Award-winning short story "Fire Watch" and her Hugo- and Nebula-winning *Doomsday Book* — where historians use time travel to study the past, but things rarely go smoothly. This time the university has nearly been taken over by the wealthy Lady Schrapnell, who's determined to create a perfect replica of Coventry Cathedral (which was destroyed during World War II) and has conscripted most of Oxford's historians to assist her in the task, researching every tiniest detail so that the project will reproduce the cathedral exactly as it was on the eve of the bombing, down to such incidentals as a piece of Victorian kitsch known as the bishop's bird stump.

Historian Ned Henry has been charged with locating this hideous object, of which no pictures exist, and he's having a very hard time of it; the project's deadline is fast approaching, and he's made so many "jumps" in search of the thing that

he's delirious with time-lag. But with so many other historians off on errands for Lady Schrapnell, Ned's the only one who can help when a crisis arises: another time traveler has done something to alter the course of history, and Ned must go back to figure out what got changed and put it right.

*To Say Nothing of the Dog* is Willis in her screwball comedy mode — snappy, fast-paced, and witty, buoyed by crisp dialogue and Willis's near-perfect comic timing. Willis is unquestionably the field's best writer in this mode, and her skills improve with each outing. "Fire Watch" is an excellent story, but in comparison with the new novel, it feels rough-edged and unpolished. Willis has by now become a supremely confident writer — the sentences in *To Say Nothing of the Dog* are honed and taut; there's nary a wasted word.

The book's intellectual dimension balances the funny side nicely. Ned's attempts to correct the timestream provide the opportunity for Willis to ruminate on the "causes" of history — is it the result of individual actions or great impersonal forces? — and, in contrast to more traditional conceptions of history, Willis portrays it as refreshingly nonlinear: "...Professor

Overforce and Professor Peddick were both right. They were just a century too early for chaos theory, which would have incorporated both their ideas. History was indeed controlled by blind forces, as well as character and courage and treachery and love. And accident and random chance. And stray bullets and telegrams and tips. And cats." Because it's nonlinear, Willis's timestream is resilient and stable, able to recover from interference and minor alterations on its own. The structure of history doesn't collapse if a dinosaur hunter steps on a butterfly.

It's this aspect that makes *To Say Nothing of the Dog* a time travel story uniquely designed for our times: in the end, the timestream isn't fixed by the efforts of Ned Henry and the other time travelers, but in spite of them. This is not a story of human competence triumphing over adversity, nor is it a tale of human bungling destroying the world; it's a tale of human insignificance, at least on a cosmic scale. Willis somehow makes this view uplifting — human insignificance here seems almost a relief: we can't fix what's wrong with the cosmos, but it's not our responsibility, either.

It's hard to imagine a clearer

distillation of the feeling of the '90s, a time of widespread exhaustion, when conditions for most people in most places aren't especially terrible, but the belief in human power to right the remaining wrongs has ebbed to a low point. Gone are the heady days of the '30s and '40s, the dreams of skillful engineers taking the cosmos in hand, and equally past are the nightmares of the '50s, '60s, and '70s, nuclear holocaust and Orwellian police states; in their place we have a benign sense of powerlessness and resignation. It's not that the possibility of disaster has completely receded — there are still plenty of nukes out there — but the '90s are not defined so much by anxiety as by a mounting awareness of our own limitations. Willis captures that without making it depressing, and that may be the toughest of the many difficult tricks that *To Say Nothing of the Dog* pulls off masterfully.

J. R. Dunn's second novel, *Days of Cain*, in most respects could hardly be more different from Willis's book, but at its heart it shares the same outlook. Where Willis is sprightly and light-hearted, though, Dunn is sober and relentless, staring unflinchingly at the darker side of a cosmos in

which human beings may not have the power to change things very much.

*Days of Cain* owes much more to the time travel tales of the past than does *To Say Nothing of the Dog*: its main character, Gaspar James, is a monitor in the "temporal extension" of "the Moiety," a term that describes the "ultimate union of consciousness in the late epochs of the universe." The temporal extension exists to protect from disruption the timeline that leads to the Moiety — it's a time patrol. As the story begins, a band of renegade time travelers, led by Alma Lewin, one of Gaspar's old recruits, has set out to prevent the Holocaust, and Gaspar has been brought in to stop them.

The Holocaust has become so familiar a topic that its horrors have — almost — lost their power to shock, but Dunn's rendition of life in the camps, the cruelties of the Nazis and even the prisoners toward each other, the indignities and savagery that filled every day, has a freshness and conviction which revive the Holocaust's unparalleled capacity to scald the imagination. Dunn avoids the easy dichotomies the Holocaust invites: not every camp sufferer is a saint, and not every Nazi is a demon. Most are

people caught up in events they cannot control, tragically aware of their own failures to live up to an heroic ideal. Dunn gives us several chapters from the viewpoint of Reber, a camp administrator too cowardly to resist the escalating cruelties of his comrades, devoured by guilt for the rest of his days; with balanced portraits like this, the true horror of the Holocaust — for both its victims and its perpetrators — suffuses the novel like the sickening smoke from the camp furnaces.

Dunn's timestream is more vulnerable than Willis's — it needs the protection of millions of workers in the temporal extension — but at a deeper level, Dunn's characters face a situation not unlike Willis's: history is a vastly complex system, each part depending on all the others, and there's no way to "fix" the past without sacrificing the future. Prevent the Holocaust, or any other disaster, and you might wipe out a million billion other beings who never have a chance to live. Humans are, as in Willis's cosmos, essentially powerless to improve the world beyond a certain limited point. Dunn focuses on the difficulty of living with that situation: How can we *not* try to change something like the Holocaust? And if we

try, how can we forgive ourselves if we fail?

For Dunn and his characters, it's not enough that on the whole history works out pretty well — that the world of the *Moiety* is far better than a thousand or a million possible alternatives. In *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, the proverbial glass is half full: it's good enough that the Allies won World War II — in fact, Willis never even mentions the Holocaust. But in *Days of Cain*, it's half empty: so many awful things have happened that it's hard to take any pleasure in the knowledge that it could have been worse. Together, Willis's and Dunn's books paint complementary portraits of our time: certainly we're glad that events have worked out as relatively well as they have, but we're still wrestling with our deep feelings of guilt over the tragedies that we have failed — and continue to fail — to prevent.

The three novels gathered in *Three in Time* make even clearer the ways in which the time travel story has changed over the years — no one could mistake any of these books for one written today. But that's hardly a mark against them: despite some inevitable datedness, each one has a solid core that shines

through the accumulated dust of decades, a beating heart that enables it to live on.

Chad Oliver's *The Winds of Time* (1957) is a fine and moving novel, but it's a strange choice for this volume. It's not actually about time travel, at least as that concept is usually imagined. Out on a fishing trip, Wes Chase takes refuge from the weather in a cave, and there discovers a small group of alien space travelers who hold him hostage while they learn about his world and, in the meantime, tell him their own story. One of many crews sent out to find other space-faring civilizations, they crashed on Earth fifteen thousand years ago. Realizing that, to have any hope at all of return, they would need to wait until Earth developed a technologically advanced culture, they hid themselves in a mountain cave and put themselves into a deep chemical hibernation, from which they have just recently awakened.

Wes somewhat reluctantly decides to help them, but he's hard put to think of what he can do: he knows that his world is centuries away from having interstellar travel. His solution not only rescues the stranded aliens, but offers him a chance for a new life after his old one has fallen apart.

On some levels it's surprising how un-dated *The Winds of Time* seems: though the alien rocket landing end-down on "a boiling column of flame" is pretty old-fashioned, Oliver's mention of "folding" space for faster-than-light travel, and the deep yearning of the aliens to find beings like themselves around other stars, could be right at home in a novel of today. At one point he even ridicules pulp sf in the very terms we might use now: "the cardboard horrors...reptilian monsters slathering after ripe young cuties, mutants who had no emotions coldly plotting the obliteration of the Good Guys with the Sense of Humor..."

In other ways, though, Oliver's novel is just as backward-seeming as that pulpery: the aliens are so similar to humans that Wes has no trouble booking them into a motel room, and while there is some thematic sense to having them be so similar, I don't think it would have hurt Oliver's point about the oneness of civilized beings if the aliens (or even any of the other civilizations they had encountered) were less humanoid. And certainly there's no thematic necessity to explain why the aliens are all male, and all white-skinned. Nonetheless, the essential parts of Oliver's story

succeed despite such quibbles; *The Winds of Time* is a good choice for the editors of the White Wolf Rediscovery series (of which this is the first volume) to have brought back into print. My only substantial question is why they chose to include it in a collection of time travel novels.

Wilson Tucker's classic *The Year of the Quiet Sun* (1970) leaves no such questions—it fits the paradigm of the time travel story almost to a tee. Against his better judgment, and not entirely of his own free will, Brian Chaney, a statistician and sometime Biblical translator, becomes part of a team recruited by the U.S. Bureau of Standards to take a short trip into the future. They're interested in seeing how accurate their social predictions are, so they can tailor their policy more closely to conditions down the road. What they find is nothing like what they expected, however: before the year 2000, race wars have divided and nearly destroyed the country; one time traveler is killed and another wounded in their visits to the future. The chaos is so complete the team doesn't even speak about ways to avert the coming catastrophe.

Tucker's book reveals the changes that swept the country and

the sf world in the years after *The Winds of Time*: where Oliver foresaw a space-conquering, ever-improving future, Tucker sees a world torn apart by its internal struggles, never coming close to the stars. Oliver was already beginning to admit such worries — the vast majority of the civilizations his aliens had encountered had destroyed themselves with their technology before they'd ever achieved space travel — but he was still optimistic enough to think that human beings would beat the odds. For Tucker, those odds will overwhelm us far more quickly than Oliver would have imagined.

In *There Will Be Time* (1972), Poul Anderson sees a near-future riven by race war as well, though his tale of a boy born with the ability to move himself through time carries much further into the future, revealing better possibilities centuries ahead. Though it's the latest of the novels in *Three in Time*, in many ways it feels the most old-fashioned: Anderson's use of time travel as an excuse for airing political philosophy has more in common with Wells than with Oliver or Tucker.

Jack Havig discovers his time traveling ability when he's a young boy, and he uses it for some of the

childish pranks one might expect, but as soon as he's grown he gets bigger plans: he's certain that there must be others like him, and he sets out to find them by going to first-century Jerusalem, the day of Jesus's crucifixion, figuring it's the kind of historical event that would draw time travelers from many eras.

Sure enough, he finds them — or, rather, they find him — and he discovers that further in the future, after the "War of Judgment" has wrecked civilization, they've joined together in a group called the Eyrie to try to rebuild it, recruiting time travelers from every century to the cause. Jack grows increasingly uncomfortable with the Eyrie's methods, though, and eventually rebels, determined to take over the Eyrie and accomplish the goals it only honors in lip-service.

Tucker, writing in 1970, doesn't seem so far from Willis and Dunn: his perspective has shifted from dreams of the stars to concern with the problems humans are having right here at home. Though he provides no theoretical reason why his time travelers can't change the course of history, events in the story prevent it — for all practical purposes, his characters are just as powerless to prevent tragedy as are Willis's or Dunn's.

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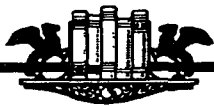
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Anderson's perspective, on the other hand, seems to derive from a time before even Oliver's: Jack has flitted back and forth through time, and yet the suffering and death of centuries leaves him apparently unmoved. He bemoans the loss of cultural treasures, such as the buildings of the Acropolis, but has nothing to say about the toll in human lives. He seems far more like the other people of the Eyrie than he should.

I don't mean to suggest that there's not a great deal that's likable about *There Will Be Time*. I

think it's the kind of book I would have enjoyed much more when I was thirteen and more easily seduced by fantasies of power like Jack's. But for my money, I'd choose a book like Willis's or Dunn's — or Oliver's or Tucker's — every time. These are books which use their science-fictional conceits to examine the difficulties and challenges of living a real human life with limited power to change the course of events — books that could help us figure out how to live with those limitations ourselves. ♣



## EDITOR'S RECOMMENDATIONS

**I**T'S THE passion that stands out most.

Throughout her book reviews from the 1960s, Judy Merrill's insights and intelligence sparkle, but it's her passion that really stands out. She loved this sf stuff from its pulpiest roots up to its crowning splendors, and she wanted to make damn sure you knew about the best of it too. Judy's dead now, but the many volumes of *The Year's Best S-F* anthology she edited are easy to find used and they show the same brilliant love of sf that marked her reviews. This flame burned bright.

Another one of science fiction's pyrotechnic wizards, Alfred Bester, has his best short fiction in a new (albeit poorly titled) collection, *Virtual Unrealities* (Vintage). One of my absolute favorites, Bester was a *bon vivant* whose stories brim with brio; they bubble with wit on reading after rereading. Sadly though, the two stories published here for

the first time are disappointing — one's a fragment and the completed story, while gratifying to read, doesn't rank with the masterpieces assembled here.

A pair of Beagles followed me home this month, and yes, I would like to keep them. Peter S. Beagle's *Giant Bones* (Roc) marks this master fantasist at the top of his form with five new novelets, while *The Rhinoceros Who Quoted Nietzsche and Other Odd Acquaintances* (Tachyon Publications) collects classics like "Lila the Werewolf" along with some juvenalia and a scattering of essays. The stories show that mastery of voices that makes all of Beagle's fiction a joy to read.

Martha Soukup remarks of "The Arbitrary Placement of Walls" that the story marks her "settling, finally, into knowing what I'm doing," and her collection with the same title (from DreamHaven Books) is interesting to mark the many regions where this talent will indeed settle.

Lest you think I read only short fiction, I'll only mention Harlan Ellison's "precariously poised" *Slip-page* (Houghton Mifflin), Lucius Shepard's *Barnacle Bill the Spacer* (Orion-UK), James Patrick Kelly's *Think Like a Dinosaur and Other Stories* (Golden Gryphon), and Ray Bradbury's *Driving Blind* (Avon) and tell you instead about a terrific fantasy novel: *The Iron Ring* (Dutton) by Lloyd Alexander. Alexander is, of course, known best for his Prydain novels, which are steeped in Welsh mythology, but this time out he has assayed Indian culture and thought with this tale of how young Prince Tamar came into his own. Lloyd Alexander is a living master who's always worth the trip to the YA section to find.

With *The Moon and the Sun* (Pocket), Vonda N. McIntyre has moved away from the space opera she has given us in the past decade and focused instead on the court of France's Louis XIV, the Sun King. This fabulous fantasy of the king's quest for immortality is lush, lyrical, magnificent, and magical.

Another alternate history, Ward Moore's 1953 novel *Bring the Jubilee*, has long held its deserved

reputation as a masterpiece and one of the best Civil War stories, but it has long been unavailable as well. Blessings on Del Rey for bringing it back into print. A different sort of reissue is William March's 1954 novel *The Bad Seed* (Ecco Press) which is better known for the movie (starring Patty McCormick as Rhoda) than it is for the original novel. The book's a curious work with lots of odd touches that ultimately add up well, especially since the book features a creepier ending than the filmmakers could risk.

The word "sumptuous" scarcely begins to describe the artwork collected in Vincent Di Fate's terrific *Infinite Worlds* (Penguin Studio). This is the finest book on sf art I've seen in a long time. I just hope there's a lower-priced edition coming, 'cause this book belongs in every sf enthusiast's collection.

And finally, I can't resist mentioning Neal Barrett, Jr.'s latest off-beat mystery, *Bad Eyes Blue* (Kensington). When you're in an anything-goes mood, Barrett's mysteries really go. This one features some cameos of other Texan novelists that add to the gonzo fun.

—GVG



*Rob Chilson notes that he does not have anything against the great state of Kansas (despite this story's opening line). Though he himself is a Missourian living in Kansas City (Missouri, that is), he admits that many of his best friends are Kansans. In fact, he adds that many of his smartest friends are former Kansans.*

*Like Dorothy said, there really is no place like home (even if you happen to come from Topeka or from Lawrence).*

# This Side of Independence

*By Rob Chilson*

**T**HEY WERE TAKING UP  
Kansas in big bites.

Geelie hovered above, detached, observing. Stark night cloaked the world under a shrunken sun, save for the pit, where hell glared. Magma glowed in the darkness where the rock, hectares wide, crumbled in the gravitor beam. Shards of the world upreared, uproared, black edged with glowing red, and lofted into the groaning air, pieces of a broken pot. The bloody light spattered on the swag-bellied ships that hung above — crows tearing at the carcass with a loud continuous clamor. Pieces of the planet fell back and splashed in thunder and liquid fire, yellow and scarlet. Old Earth shuddered for kilometers around.

The glare, the heat, the tumult filled the world. But from a distance, Geelie saw, it was reduced to a cheerful cherry glow and a murmur of sound, lost in the endless night. In her long view, Kansas was a vast sunken plain of contorted rock, dusted with silent snow under a shaded sun.

"Aung Charah in *Tigerclaw* to Goblong Seven," Geelie's speaker said.

"Goblong Seven to Aung Charah," she said.

"Geelie, take a swing around the south side of the working pit and look at the terraces there. I think the magma is flowing up on them."

"Hearing and obedience."

Kansas was a hole walled with stairsteps of cooled lava, terraced for kilometers down to the pit of hell. As fast as the rock froze, it was torn off in hectare-sized chips, to feed the hungry space colonies.

Geelie swung her goblong and swooped down and around the work site. She peered intently in dimness, blinded by the contrast. The magma was definitely crawling up on the lower terrace of cooled rock.

"It's slow as yet," she reported, sending the teleview to Aung Charah.

"We'll have to watch it, however, or we'll have another volcano. Check on it frequently," he told her.

"Hearing and obedience," Geelie said. She leaned forward to peer up through the windscreen.

The Sun was a flickering red candle, the cherry color of the magma. As she watched, it brightened; brightened; brightened again, to a dazzling orange. Then it faded, paused, recovered — briefly showed a gleam of brilliance that glimpsed the black rock below, streaked with snow. Then it faded, faded further, almost vanished.

The Sun was a candle seen through a haze of smoke. But each drifting mote was a space colony with solar panels extended, jostling in their billions jealously to seize the Sun. One by one, the planets of old Sol had been eaten by the colonies, till only Earth was left, passed into the shades of an eternal night.

And now the Old World's historical value had been overridden by the economic value of its water, air, and rock. Also, its vast gravity well was a major obstacle to space traffic.

Noon, planetary time, Geelie thought.

She took her goblong in a long sweep around the work site, occasionally touching the visual recorder's button. Her Colony, Kinabatangan, was a member of The Obstacle-Leaping Consortium; she was part of Kinabatangan's observer team.

A gleam of light caught her eye, and she looked sharply aside. East, she realized. Puzzled, she looped the goblong back again more slowly and sought for the gleam. She found it, but it immediately winked out.

That was odd, she thought. A bright light, yellow or even white — surely artificial — on the highlands to the east. That was disputed land, it was not yet being worked. Perhaps, she thought, observers had set up a camp on the planet.

She called Aung Charah and reported, got permission to check it out. "If I can find it," she said. "The light is gone again; door closed, perhaps."

"I'm having Communications call; I'll keep you informed," Aung Charah said.

She acknowledged and cruised as nearly straight as she could along the beam she'd seen. Presently the land mounted in broken scarps before her, vaguely seen in the wan bloody light of the Sun. Vast masses of shattered rock, covered with snow or capped with ice, tumbled down from the highlands. Missouri, that was what its uncouth name had been, Geelie saw, keying up her map.

At this point there'd been a great sprawling city, Kansas City by name, more populous than a dozen colonies. The parts which had straggled over the border had been mined and the once vertical scarp had collapsed. East of the line, everything this side of Independence on her map had fallen into the hole that was Kansas.

"Aung Charah in *Tigerclaw* to Geelie in Goblong Seven," said her speaker. "Communications reports no contact. We have no report of anyone in that area. Behinders?" Dubiously.

"Unlikely. However, I am checking. Goblong Seven out."

It was three hundred years since stay-behind planetarians had been found on the mother world. Considering how bleak it now was, Geelie considered them extremely unlikely, as by his tone did Aung Charah.

She cruised slowly over the tumbled mounds of snow-covered rubble that marked the old city. Kilometers it extended, and somehow Geelie found that more oppressive even than the vast expanse of riven rock behind her. She could not imagine the torrents of people who must have lived on this deck. The average Colony had only a hundred thousand.

She peered into the dimness. The rubble showed as black pocks in the blood-lit snow. Presently she came to hover and pondered.

Possibly she'd seen a transitory gleam off a sheet of transpex or polished rock or metal in the old city, she thought. But the color was wrong. No. She'd seen a light. Perhaps there were commercial observers

here from a different consortium — not necessarily spying on The Obstacle-Leaping Consortium. There might be many reasons why commercial observers would want to keep secret.

Infra-red, she thought. The goblong wasn't equipped with IR viewers, but Aung Charah had given her a pair of binox. She unharnessed and slipped into the back for them. And a few minutes later she saw a plume of light against the chill background.

It leaked in two dozen points from a hill of rubble a kilometer away. Geelie got its coordinates and called Aung Charah to report.

"I'm going to go down and request permission to land."

"Of course this 'Missouri' is not part of our grant," Aung Charah said. "They — whoever they are — will probably have a right to refuse. Do nothing to involve us legally."

"Hearing and obedience."

Geelie sloped the goblong down, circled the mound, presently found a trampled place in the thin snow and kicked on her lights. Aiming them down, she saw footprints and a door in an ancient wall made of clay brick, a wall patched with shards of concrete glued together. The mound was a warren, a tumble of broken buildings run together, with forgotten doors and unlighted windows peering from odd angles under a lumpy, snow-covered roof.

She sent back a televue, saying, "I wonder if this is an observers' nest after all."

"Any answer on the universal freqs?"

"One moment." She called, got no answer. "I'm going to land without formal permission and bang on the door."

"Very well."

Geelie landed the goblong, leaving its lights on, and slipped into the back. She pulled her parka hood forward, drew on her gloves, and opened the door. A breath of bitter cold air entered, making her gasp. Ducking out, she started for the door.

Movement caught her eye and she looked up, to see a heavily bundled figure standing atop a pile of rubble by the wall.

"Hello!" she called.

"Hello," came a man's voice. He was not twice as thick as a normal human, she saw — he was simply wearing many layers of cloth against

the biting cold.

Geelie exhaled a cloud of vapor, calming herself. So crudely dressed a man had to be a behinder — and who knew how he would react?

"I-I am Geelie of Kinabatangan Colony, a member of The Obstacle-Leaping Consortium. Permission to land?"

"What? Oh, granted. That would be you, working over there in Kansas?" His tone was neutral, if guarded. His accent was harsh, rasping, but not unintelligible.

"Yes."

"What brings you here? Will you now begin on Missourah?"

"No," she said. "Missourah," carefully pronouncing it as he had, "is disputed by a number of consortiums and wrecking companies. It will be years before they have settled that dispute."

"That's good to hear," said the other, and moved. With a dangerous seeming scramble, he slid down from the rubble pile.

Confronting her, he was a head taller than she, and very pale, a pure caucasoid type, in the light from her goblong. He even had the deep blue eyes once confined to caucasoids, and his beard was yellow.

"Name's Clayborn," he said, proffering his hand. "Enos Clayborn."

She squeezed and shook it in the european fashion. "Pleased to meet you, U — er, Mr. Clayborn."

"Won't you come in out of the cold?" he asked, gesturing toward the door.

"Thank you." She followed him gratefully. The bleakness more than the cold chilled her.

The door opened, emitting a waft of warm air that condensed into fog. Geelie stepped in, inhaling humidity and the smell of many people, with an undertone of green plants. It was like, yet unlike, the air of a Colony; more people, less plants, she thought; not so pure an air. She was standing in a vestibule with wooden walls covered with peeling white paint; overhead a single square electrolumer gave a dim yellowish light.

Clayborn fastened the door behind her and stepped past her to open the other door, gesturing her through it. Pushing her hood back, Geelie opened her parka as she entered a room full of tubs of snow, slowly melting; piles of wooden boards; piles of scrap metal; shelves full of things obviously salvaged from the ruins; an assortment of tools. Beyond this was

yet another door, opening into a large, brightly lit room full of furniture and people.

"Enos is ba — Enos has brought someone!" "Enos has brought a stranger!" "A strange woman!" The exclamations ran through the room quickly, and a couple of people slipped out. Moments later, they and several others returned.

"Folks, this is Geelie of — of— ?" Clayborn turned to her.

"Kinabatangan Colony," Geelie said. Old people, she thought. "Observer of The Obstacle-Leaping Consortium."

"Those are the ones mining Kansas," Clayborn said. "Geelie tells me that they won't start mining Missouri" (pronouncing it differently, she noticed) "for quite a few years yet."

Clayborn in his mid-twenties was the youngest person in the room, she saw. The next youngest were four or five hale middle-aged sorts with gray in their hair, perhaps twice his age, and ranging up from there to a frail ancient on a couch, big pale eyes turned toward her and a thin wisp of cottony hair on a pillow. A dozen and a half at most.

"How long have you been here?" she asked, marveling.

"Forever," said one of the white-haired oldsters drily. "We never been anywheres else."

Geelie smiled back at their smiles. "I am awed that you have survived," she said simply, removing her parka and gloves.

"This is our leader, Alden," said Clayborn, pulling up a chair for her.

"The last hundred years was the worst," said Alden.

The behinders, having overcome their shyness, now crowded forward and Clayborn introduced them. Geelie bowed and spoke to all, shook with the bolder ones. When she seated herself, one of the women handed her a cup on a european saucer. She looked at them with awe, reflecting that they must be a thousand years old.

"Brown," she heard them murmur. "Brown. Beautiful — such a nice young woman. Such beautiful black hair."

She sipped a mild coffee brew and nodded her thanks. "The last hundred years?" she said to Alden. "Yes, it must have been."

For over nine hundred years Earth had been in partial shadow and permanent glaciation, but the Sun still shone. Then the greedy colonies broke their agreements and moved massively into the space between the

Old World and the Sun. Earth passed into the shadows, and shortly thereafter they began to disassemble it.

"Course, our ancestors laid in a good supply of power cells and everything else we'd need, way back when Earth was abandoned by everybody else," Alden said. "No problems there. But how much longer will the air last?"

"Oh, maybe another hundred years," she said, startled. "Freezing it for transport is a slow process."

"And the glaciers? They came down this way back when the Sun shone bright."

Geelie smiled, shook her head. "It's so cold now that even the oceans are freezing over, so the glaciers can't grow by snowfall. Also, frankly, the glaciers were the first to be mined; that much fresh water was worth plenty. Of course the oceans are valuable too, and they have been heavily mined also."

"The snowfall gets thinner every year," said Clayborn. "We have to go farther and farther to get enough. Soon we'll be reduced to thawing the soil for water."

Geelie's response was interrupted by the discreet beeping of her wrist radio. She keyed it on. "Aung Charah in *Tigerclaw* to Geelie in Goblong Seven," it said in a tiny voice, relayed from the goblong.

"Geelie to Aung Charah," she said into it. "I have received permission to land and am with a group of native Earthers."

"Behinders," said Alden drily.

She flashed him a smile and said, "Behinders, they call themselves."

"Er — yes," said Aung Charah, sounding startled. "Er — carry on. Aung Charah out."

"Hearing and obedience. Geelie out."

"Carry on?" Alden asked.

Geelie sobered. She had been excited and amazed at meeting these people and had not thought ahead. "Well," she said. "He represents the Consortium and dares not commit it. You are not his problem."

"We never thought of ourselves as anybody's problem," said Alden mildly. "More coffee?"

\*\*\*

Geelie bowed to Lyou Ye, who stood to respond, then reseated herself behind her desk and frowned.

"Behinders," she said. "They must be the very last. It's been what, three hundred years since any have been found, that lot in Africa." She looked sharply at Geelie. "Aung Charah is right, they're not our problem. They live in 'Missouri,' however it's pronounced, outside our grant. They're the problem of the Missouri Compact."

"But those people won't settle their disputes for years, possibly decades," said Geelie. "We can't just let these behinders die."

Lyou Ye glanced aside, frowning, and tapped her finger. She'd come a long way, Geelie knew, in a short time. A very beautiful woman, ten years older than Geelie, with waving masses of dark red hair and the popular tiger-green eyes contributed by gene-splicing, she was commonly called Ma Kyaw, "Miss Smooth." But she was intelligent and fully aware of the power of public opinion.

"Very well, if you can find a Colony willing to sponsor them, I'll authorize shipping to lift them out," Lyou Ye said abruptly. "It won't take much, fortunately, by your description. Declining population ever since the Sun was shaded, I take it, with only this 'Enosclayborn' in the last generation. They'd have ended soon enough. You found them just in time for him," she added. "He's probably still a virgin."

"I'd personally like to thank Geelie for all the time and trouble she's put in for us, her and all her folks," said Alden.

Geelie flushed with pleasure as they applauded her.

"Now, I'll just ask for a show of hands," Alden continued. "All them that's in favor of flyin' off into space to a colony, raise your hand."

Geelie leaned forward eagerly.

There was a long pause. The behinders turned their faces to each other, Geelie heard a whisper or two, someone cleared a throat. But no one looked at her.

Alden stood looking around, waited a bit, then finally said, "Don't look like there's anybody in favor of the city of Independence movin' into a colony. But that don't mean nobody can go. Anybody that wants to is naturally free to leave. Just speak to me, or to Miss Geelie here."

Shocked, horrified, Geelie looked at them. Someone coughed. Still no

one looked at her. She turned a stricken gaze on Enos Clayborn. He looked thoughtful but unsurprised. And he had not raised his hand.

So silent was the room that the purring of a mother cat, entering at the far side with a squirming kitten in her mouth, seemed loud.

Alden turned to her. "New ideas, like flyin' space, sometimes is hard to take in," he said kindly. "We had since yesterday to talk it over, but still it's a new idea. Enos, you might take the little lady back to Gretchen's nest and give them kittens a little attention."

Enos smiled at her, and faces were turned from the cat to her, smiling in relief. "She's bringing her kittens out," Geelie heard them murmur. "They're old enough for her to introduce them around."

Numbly she followed the tall young man back through the warren of abandoned passages to the warm storage room where the cat had her nest.

When he evidently intended merely to play with the kittens, she said, "Enos, why — why didn't they vote to go?"

"Well, we're used to it here. As Alden said, it takes time to get used to new ideas." He handed her a kitten. "This is the runt — the last born of the litter. We named her Omega — we'll give them all shots in another month or two; she'll be the last cat born on Earth."

Absently she took the purring kitten, a tiny squirming handful of fur. "But you'll all die if you don't go!"

"Well, we'll all die anyway," he said mildly. "Ever notice most of us are old folks? A lot aren't so far from dying now. They'd just as soon die in a place they know. We've been here a long time, you know."

"But — but — *you're* not old! And your parents, and Alden's daughter Aina, and Camden —"

"I wouldn't know how to act, anywhere but here," he said mildly. He smiled down at the proudly purring mother cat.

G

EELIE, LYOU YE, and Aung Charah sat in the small conference room.

Lyou Ye grimaced. "So that was their reaction? I'll admit it wasn't one I'd foreseen. All the other behinders in history agreed to go. Some of them signaled to us."

Geelie shifted her position uneasily, cross-legged on a pillow, and nodded unhappily. "I even offered to send them to a european Colony,

so they'd be among familiar-seeming people, but that didn't help."

Aung Charah shook his head. "We're getting a lot of publicity on this," he said. "The newsmedia are not hostile yet. But what will they say when the behinders' refusal becomes known?"

Lyou Ye frowned. "They'll blame us, depend upon it. Have any of them interviewed the behinders?"

Aung Charah shook his head. "They have to get permission from the Missouri Compact, which is very cautious. These planetarians have rights too. Invasion of their privacy...." He shook his head again.

"If we leave them here to die, we'll certainly be blamed," said Lyou Ye. "I'm tempted to order Consortium Police in to evacuate them forcibly."

Geelie sipped her tea, looking at "Ma Kyaw." That's your sort of solution, she thought. Direct, uncompromising, get it done, get it over with. And somebody else can pick up the pieces, clean up the mess.

"Alden would certainly complain if that were done," she said, speaking up reluctantly. "The media attention would be far worse. Violation of planetary rights...they may even have some claim to the old city of Independence. The Missouri Compact may legally have to wait for them all to die to mine that part of its grant."

Lyou Ye grimaced again. "I suppose you're right."

Aung Charah set his cup down. "Media criticism won't hurt the Consortium if we leave them here. The criticism we'd get if we violate their rights might affect us adversely. Investors — "

Lyou Ye was a "careerman." She nodded, frowning, lips pursed.

Geelie looked around the room, so unlike the comfortably cluttered warren in which Enos lived. In one wall, a niche with an arrangement of flowers, signifying *This too shall pass*; the woven screen against another wall, with its conventional pattern of crows over tiny fields curving up in the distance; the parquet floor with its fine rich grain; the subtle, not quite random leaf pattern of ivory and cream on the walls; the bronze samovar and the fantastically contorted porcelain dragon teapot, the only ornate thing in the room.

Enos was right, she thought. He would not know how to live in a place like this.

She thought of the world that was all he had ever known, a place of snow-powdered rock and brooding, perpetual night, a red-eyed Sun blown

in the wind. A bare, harsh, bleak place without a future. For him, in the end, it could only mean tending the old "folks" as one by one they died, and then the penultimate generation, the generation of his parents, as they also grew old. At last he would be left alone to struggle against the darkness and the cold until he too lay dying, years of solitude and then a lonely death.

"There's no help for it," said Lyou Ye broodingly. She looked at Geelie. "You'll have to seduce Enosclayborn."

Geelie swept snow from a rock onto a dustpan, dumped it into a bucket.

"Don't get it on your gloves," Enos said. "It's a lot colder than it looks."

"How much do you have to bring in each day?"

"Not much; I usually overdo it. I enjoy being outside. The air is clean and cold, and I can see so far."

Geelie shivered, looking around the lands of eternal night. "Doesn't the shaded sun bother you?"

"It's always been like that." He looked around at the dim, tumbled landscape, emptying his bucket into the tub. "It's always been like this. Okay, that should be enough. Take the other handle and we'll carry it in."

In the vestibule they put the tub of snow in the row of tubs, and shed their parkas. Despite the slowly melting snow here, it seemed warm and steamy after the sharp cold air outside. Still, remembering the bleak world without, Geelie shuddered. She would have moved close to Enos even if she had not planned to do so. He put an arm around her, not seeming particularly surprised.

"You'll soon get used to it yourself," he said tolerantly.

"Never," she said, meaning it, cuddling close, her arms around him. She lifted her face for a kiss, nuzzling her breasts against his chest.

Enos put his palm on her cheek and pushed her gently aside. "Let's not start something we can't finish," he said.

Geelie blinked up at him, uncomprehending. "In your room — or the kittens' room — out in the passages — " Independence was a maze of warm, unused, and private passages.

He cupped her face with both hands and looked fondly at her. "Thank you very much, Geelie, for your offer. I will treasure it all the days of my

life. But your place is in Kinabatangan, and mine is here, and we should not start something we cannot finish."

The pain of rejection was like a child's pain — the heavy feeling in the chest, the sharp unshed tears. Then came a more poignant grief — grief for all that she could not give him, that he would not take from her.

"Enos! — Enos!" she said, and then her sobs stopped her speech.

"O Geelie, Geelie," he said, his voice trembling. He held her close and stroked her hair.



ALDEN CAME AND SAT beside her in the cozy common room of Independence, where she sat watching Jackson Clayborn and Aina Alden play checkers.

"You look a little peaked," he said quietly.

She slid her chair back and spoke as quietly. "I suppose so."

"Enos will be back soon enough. He's lookin' through his things for something to fix that pump in the hydro room. Enos'd druther fix things and tinker around than play games like that." But he was looking inquiringly at her.

"Well, someone has to keep things going," she said wanly.

"Ye-ah." Alden drawled the word out, a skeptical affirmative. "Someone does, though we got a few hands here can still tend to things." Abruptly he said, "By your face and your attitudes, these last few days, I reckon you ain't persuaded Enos to go with you?"

Geelie looked sharply at him. "No," she said shortly.

"I was afraid of that," he said, low. Startled, Geelie leaned toward him. "Did you think I was fightin' you? No, I was hopin' you'd persuade him. God knows you got persuasions none of us can offer. *We* can't offer him nothing."

Passionately she whispered, "Then why won't he come with us? All he says is that his place is here — and after that he won't say anything! Why?"

Alden's response was slow in coming. "I suppose he can't say why because he don't know how. Why he should feel his place is here, I don't know. My place is here; I'm an old man. But he don't listen to me any more than he does to you."

He shook his head. "If he stays, what'll he have? All he'll have is

Independence, as long as he lives — the man from the Missouri Compact explained that. That's all. I guess," slowly, "for him, that's enough."

The kitten, Omega, jumped from Geelie's arms and began to investigate the room, not having sense enough to stay away from Lyou Ye. She was "Miss Smooth" no longer, stalking about the room and visibly trying to contain her anger.

"A flat refusal! I can't believe he refused you. Do you realize there've been over seven thousand Colonies offering them a place to live — over five thousand offering to take the whole group. And we can't get even the young one to leave Earth! What is wrong with him?"

"He says his place is there," said Geelie, nervously watching the kitten prowling.

"He's been brainwashed by those old people," Lyou Ye said.

"Not intentionally," Geelie said. "I discussed it with them, and they prefer to stay, but they would be happy to see Enos go. They know there's no future for him there."

"And for some uncommunicable reason, he thinks there's no future for him with us," said Lyou Ye, more calmly. She shook her head, ran her hands through her mass of auburn hair. "I suppose he's been unconsciously brainwashed from birth, knowing that he was the last one, that he was going to take care of them and die alone, and he's accepted that. It won't be easy to break that kind of life-long conditioning. Well." She shook Omega away from her ankle and turned to Geelie.

"Your tour as Observer is almost up. Would it be worthwhile to extend it and give you more time to work on him?"

Geelie put her hand to her chest. "No," she said, and cleared her throat. "No, it would not be worthwhile. I...can do nothing with him."

"We'll send somebody else, but I don't have much hope. These cold-hearted euros can be so inscrutable." Lyou Ye sat and examined Geelie. "You're right. It's time we got you away from Earth," she said gently.

The weather in Kinabatangan was clear and calm when Geelie returned from Earth. She pulled herself to the bubble at the axis and looked down at the tiny, idyllic fields and villages below, past the terraces climbing the domed end of the vast cylinder. She could have walked down

the stairs, but took instead the elevator. At Deck level she was met by her cousins and siblings, the younger of whom rushed her and engulfed her in a mass hug, all laughing and babbling at once, a torrent of brown faces.

Half-floating in a golden mist of warmth, brilliant sunshine from the Chandelier, and love, Geelie let them lead her between the tiny fields and over the little bridges. She breathed deep of her ancient home, air redolent of the cycle of birth and death. They came presently to her small house in the edges of Lahad Datu. Frangipani grew by its door and squirrels ran nervously across its roof. A flight of harsh black crows pounded heavily up and away from the yard, where the tables were.

They'd spread a feast for her, and she ate with them and listened while they told her of the minute but important changes that had occurred in her absence. As she floated in this supporting bubble of light and warmth, Kinabatangan came back to her. All was as if she had never been away.

Her lover had found another, in the easy way of Kinabatangan, and that night Geelie slept alone. And in sleep she remembered again the bleak black plains of nighted Earth, and the man who inhabited them, who had chosen to wander alone forever under a frozen Sun.

She awoke and had difficulty remembering whether she was in Kinabatangan, dreaming of Independence, the half-seen land of Missouri stretching stark around it — or in *Tigerclaw* dreaming of Kinabatangan. She looked around the tiny room with its paper walls, its mats, the scent of frangipani in the air — she was in Kinabatangan, in her own little house, on her own mattress on the floor, and it was over. All over.

Omega yawned, a tiny pink cavern floored with a delicately rough pink tongue. The kitten was curled on the other pillow. Geelie reached for her.

"Oh! You little devil," she cried, flinging the kitten aside.

Startled, Omega had bitten her hand, and now stood in the middle of the room, looking at her with slit eyes.

Furious, Geelie leaped from her bed. But she could not stand, all the strength went out of her legs and she sank to the floor, sobbing. "Omega, Omega, I'm sorry, s-sorry." Grief as great as for a planet tore at her.

Omega crept cautiously over and sat staring up at her, watching Geelie weep.



*Rebecca Ore's shorter fiction has been collected in Alien Bootlegger and Other Stories and her recent novels include Slow Funeral and Gaia's Toys. Coming up is a new one entitled The Outlaw School.*

*"Accelerated Grimace" grew out of her experiences in the poetry community in New York and in California, where she observed the curious behavior of the spouses and ex-spouses of many famous artists, who seemingly wanted to have their cake and eat it, too....*

# Accelerated Grimace

*By Rebecca Ore*



H, YES, I'LL SHOW YOU US, Ralph and Marilyn, together forever in a photograph, being rich on a sailboat off the Hamptons. Ralph was never an

unsuccessful artist in any medium but the dollars-for-kilobytes really came in after Ralph began selling virtuals and holographs based on his take on my inner thoughts. He put up with me because my meanness is so visual. I put up with his brain rape to become his widow. Sometimes, when we were sailing, I wondered if he wanted me to murder him. His brain suck went deep.

Back when we were semi-rich, I learned significant things and how to forget them, putting together memories of a woman turning in a night party with my husband Ralph's nervous hands twitching over his computer mouse and keyboard as he pulled images from his files. *Put up with it — he's doing so well*, I'd remind myself. *Forget it. Wives inherit.* If I killed him, his child would be the sole heir.

One Sunday, Ralph quoted from and commented on the Sunday New

*York Times* article on the brain-scanning machines, "'Each human being tested believes he or she is the center of the universe.' Marilyn, they can't know this absolutely. The sample is too small."

Every Sunday, Ralph walked Jones the dog and came back with frozen croissant dough, fresh fruit, and chocolate while I downloaded *The New York Times* through the modem. I printed a paper copy on the large printer/scanner so we could read it traditionally. I'd fold it in the traditional order and would hand it to Ralph when he came back. Then he stripped down again to pajama bottoms and bare feet, curling around the newspaper as though he'd tear it to shreds for a nest, his Sunday New York Time.

He always pulled the art section free first, but was possessive of it all, though he'd read bits to me. I couldn't look at any section until he finished the whole paper. While he read to me, I made our breakfast, wrapping croissant dough around Belgian chocolate bars, dipping strawberries in cream and arranging them with cheese slices on the breakfast plates. These rituals we called our marriage. His lovers didn't have rituals.

As I listened to Ralph read this Sunday, I wondered why the scientists needed a machine to know each living being was the star of its own story. Everyone was egotistical. I almost said, *but of course it's true* but perhaps I'd become the Artist Widow if Ralph didn't realize that I, too, was a Center of the Universe. So I asked, "How large a sample? How diverse?"

"Four hundred people. IQs from 63 to 155. Female, male."

"Mothers?" I asked.

"The mothers were more important than their children who needed them to be born and raised."

My mother always told me *reared, not raised. Cattle are raised. Children are reared.* "What about Buddhists?" I asked. "Artists?"

"Each Buddhist meditated perfectly, saving the unenlightened by the bushel. But they didn't have any artists. That's why I said the sample was too small. You can't sample the human race without artists."

As the croissants came out of the oven, I remembered Borges. "What if it's true? The center of the universe is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere. Or something like that?"

He looked up at me over his reading glasses, an image prop. Before Ralph let me sign the pre-nuptial agreement, I had to have vision corrective surgery. Glasses intensify the eyes, remind of the brain directing the

eyes, not the effect he wanted on his women. He asked me, his own eyeballs severe as he liked behind the black frames, "Do you think you're the center of the universe?"

*Not the center, a center. Of course, the center of my own universe.* I said, "I'm an observer. I love beautiful things." Ralph was close to becoming a thing. I gave him his plate and wondered if I could slip the Book Review Section away from him without his noticing.

"Your mind and you are our Sargasso Sea," Ralph quoted from Ezra Pound. In my passage through the art world, boring and intriguing anecdotes alike spiraled into my memory waiting to be rescued by a semantic sailor who could untangle golden stories from weed pulp. In that nothing quite my own was me. Undifferentiated from my anecdotes, a nothing not quite my own, I could be cheated on, my past lovers freeing him for his present adulteries. Art and artists were not time bound — all past, no present.

In my future, I'd be on the prow of a sloop off the Hamptons, with another art widow, laughing as we hauled up sails made of our husband's surplus canvases. We baked excess CDs into clay targets and shot them as they began tumbling to the ocean. Excess production — blam, fallen to a sporting clay shotgun.

Would Ralph die in a car wreck like Pollack, be hit by a beach cab, stroke out in a mistress's bed, or bleed out the gut-shot victim of a wannabe's violence? I, who could always recognize talent that intrigued with the morbid, picked Ralph because he reeked of success and early death.

When we first met, he had put me naked on a dais, my hair flowing like seaweed over my skull bones and skin, wearing glasses then myself. Still a canvas man then, he painted deviations from me, while I snapped my thoughts around his future coffin. My imagination sailed the art widow's schooner off Southampton, leaving behind at Springs his perfect tombstone.

His first wife had been the fellow art student; the second had been the gallery owner who ignored all her artists' affairs with wealthy buyers. Now I was devoted to becoming his widow.

So we could read brains now. "Marilyn, what are you thinking," he asked. "I'd like to know."

Under my skull bones, wrapped in dura mater, my thoughts, aware they could be read now, began to move anxiously along the neurons and dendrites. "I don't like the idea of this machine," I said. "Shouldn't some things stay mysteries?"

"I want to read you," Ralph said. He looked over his glasses at me again, the half glass coming up to the bottom of his irises. His chest hairs were beginning to fluff up after his sweaty walk with the dog. Jones came up and pushed against Ralph, begging for croissant.

"But what will you know?" I asked. "The sample is too small to prove anything. They didn't include artists."

He said, "I can use your thoughts as metaphors."

I wondered if the wild boy mask concealed a mirror reflecting void. The two nouns bounced the mediating participle between them as though thinking about whether to insert a hyphen. I almost said, *Only if you let me read you*, then realized I preferred my idea of him to any possible reality. "But I'm your mirror, the woman you look at." Jones came over to me and nudged me with his nose. I fended him off, wondering if dogs also thought they were the centers of their universes.

Ralph put the Book Review beside my plate without looking at it himself. Did this mean he doubted my mind was as dedicated to his image as his mirrors were? "If you need to stay mysterious, I understand," he said, meaning *I'll never forgive you for denying me access to material*.

The Book Review lay beside my chocolate croissant. I picked up the croissant first, its chocolate heart congealing. He'd found the classic croissant chocolate this time, slightly gritty, more bitter than sweet, an Aztec flavor. And it had chilled enough while we talked of brain readings so it didn't squirt when I bit down. I looked back at Ralph, then opened the Book Review.

While I ate the croissant and looked for interesting books, Ralph shot me with strobes and the data-back view camera. I'd see myself tomorrow on photo canvas or in a virtual space, Mandlebrotted into the brainscape Ralph wanted to invade.

*But you can't figure me out. I'm attached at the back to infinity*, I wanted to quote from Lafcadio Hearn. But, the future widow sails flapping in a tack, I just said, "Looks like the most interesting books are now CD-ROM only."

He took the Book Review away from me to see what had intrigued me. They were all histories — art, technology, and war. I said, "My mind and I are your Sargasso Sea." Perhaps I could cheat the machine. Perhaps the technicians doing the reading could be bribed.

**D**ISBELIEVING the mind-reading machine turned out to be popular at the next couple of gallery openings. Technology in general faded in the art market that month. More and more people claimed to be able to tell the difference between machine-ground colors and those the artist ground by hand. Ralph sold nothing that month, but I still trusted my bet.

Ralph's ex-wife brought neo-primitives to the opening of someone else's light sculptures. She pulled out two lucite-boxed paintings from her portfolio. Ralph, despite being a techno-man who sent his sculpture designs out to CAM workshops and his virtuals and holo works to the best recording and editing studios, had already begun to get fascinated with the theory. No sales for a month will do that to anyone. His ex-wife opened the boxes and said, "Look. Tell me if you can see the difference or not?"

Ralph juggled the two paintings before him, talking as he looked. "If a machine does any of the work, it isn't the machine and you, with the machine as a tool, it's the person who made the machine and you. Then the patron looking at the work is at least the third collaborator. Plus I steal or not from all the past artists who become my collaborators either way. Do you think anyone can express a private vision unmediated by collective experience?"

His ex-wife said, "If you grind your own colors, you know what you're using them for. The emotionality affects the grinding. And I can see this. I'm not saying this means collaborative art is wrong, but the actual physicality of it is a visible distinction the artist can use semiotically."

That season, we could all see the difference between hand-ground pigments and machine-milled before the tedium of grinding one's own colors obliterated the making of those distinctions.

I asked, "Ralph, why don't you start working in egg tempera?" If I remembered correctly, egg tempera must be used by the end of the day and is harder to retouch than watercolors. I wondered, too, if the mind-reading machine was utterly transparent or if the conceptions of the designers

colored the end result. His ex-wife took the paintings out of his hands before I could see them and slid them back into their lucite jewel boxes.

Ralph swung around one of the support posts in the gallery, not exuberantly enough to avoid the appearance of pose. Everyone looked once to see who, then turned Manhattan faces back to each other, all centers of the universe. Ralph said, "So, this is what you're representing now?"

The ex-wife smiled at me, and said, "Yes. Clear messages from human to human."

I said, "Who makes the paper or weaves the canvas or planes the boards?"

"All hand-done," she answered, but she didn't claim by the artist who signed in the corner. In past big-money art eras, artists' apprentices ground the paint, gessoed the boards, put down the plaster for the frescos, hauled the blocks from the quarry, painted draperies, sky, and settings. So, now, in Mexico or India, other hands left their messages under the ones given by the primary artist. Probably a computer-aided workshop technician had more optimistic messages than a Third World craftsman.

Ralph said, "I'll follow it, but now I'm trying to get Marilyn to sit for a brain-machine reading."

The ex-wife asked, "Why?" as though what he asked was essentially absurd.

"For images to twist," Ralph said. "For another brain to collaborate with."

The ex-wife swung her eyes at me, just noticing I was really there, not a semiotic indicator for the position *new wife*. I remembered her name. *Judy*. She said, "But all you'd know is that you aren't the center of her universe any more than you were the center of mine." Judy was mother of The Child. When I was growing up, I wondered what kind of children Kafka would have had. Now, I'm not curious. Ralph sees The Child alone most of the times, taking him to the Bronx Zoo, the Metropolitan, the Frick, the Coney Island Aquarium where dolphins who also think they are the center of the universe tease their handler by doing the trick before the one she asks them to do now.

I said, "The sample isn't large enough," and smiled to back her away from us. *Go, ex-wife, back to your accounting programs and your brave new artistic movement and your Artist's Child*. After she made her

excuse about coming back after she'd talked to her artists, I asked Ralph, "Do you really think I'm different from everyone else?" My question's tone seemed a trifle off.

Ralph said, "I want to know you even better."

*Though her tender flesh is near, her mind I cannot fathom.* Whose quote was that? From Asia, no doubt, not a Western sentiment at all. "Ralph, don't." The brain machine was a hoop to jump a wife through. I remembered the one time I'd gone with Ralph and his son to Coney Island. The dolphins and the handler locked themselves into mutual piss-off, the handler's face getting redder and redder. Even the adults who'd only come with children realized what the dolphins were doing to her. Perhaps we didn't understand it from the dolphins' point of view — trapped in a sonic cage, perhaps hearing the sea echoing beyond them through the water table, the filtration pipes. Maybe they just couldn't remember the tricks in time? Maybe they didn't want to be possessed completely and disobeyed out of anger, not knowing what it was to tease. "Are you teasing? Don't tease me with this. I want to always be able to surprise you."

"We could read each other," Ralph said. "No secrets."

I tuned my vocal chords to perfect jest. "What if I told you I tolerated your mistresses because I plan to be your widow?"

He smiled. I smiled back, eyes corrected so I could drive him while he thought up images unrestrained by stop lights. Hips wiggle, a hint. My eyes unfocused to look at him the way a cat looks with half-closed eyes at a favorite. I said, "Let's read Jones first. What will he think?" Could I convince myself to adore him for the duration of the reading? I'd seen fully intelligent women appear to adore dolts, but then I hadn't been inside their minds.

From the outside, I looked like those women. I wore the heavy silks fashionable with artists' wives this season, the cut as curious as a Klein bottle, buttoned with one piece of monkeypod wood. My blonde hair, each strand coated with density enhancers, swung in an asymmetrical cut. For an instant, I see myself from the outside in my mind's eye, a construction from earlier mirror inspections as to how I should appear, then I look through my own eyes at Ralph, an artist in spectacles.

I left him at the party, flirting with a woman in a mohair sweater dress.

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"We'll both do it together," Ralph said over another Sunday *New York Times*. "Make it mutual."

"Do what?" I asked, hoping he didn't mean for us to be brain-scanned together.

"Have our thoughts read."

"Isn't the technique still a bit primitive?" I asked, then bit into my croissant. The chocolate this time was too sweet and too runny inside the hot pastry. Blisters rose behind my top incisors. I wiped my chin and took another bite anyway. The times called for pain. "Can they really read someone as complex as an artist?"

"I've been asking friends with Columbia-Presbyterian connections," Ralph said. "The researcher in charge is fascinated by the idea of cross-reading a couple."

*Stop thinking of the sloop off the Hamptons.* "Ralph, you'll ruin my mystery." Oscar Wilde's mean quip, *women are sphinxes without secrets*, popped into my thoughts.

"Both into both," Ralph said. "They only ask that we sit in on the discussion."

How could the experimenters check the veracity of their machines? Wasn't anyone embarrassed about being the center of the universe? "Whatever." I wanted to ask him to promise not to leave me whatever I thought, but didn't want to suggest that anything might go wrong with these readings.

"I'll lead you into my mind," Ralph said.

*Oh, so that's it.* Ralph wants me to know even more about his real center of the universe. But was he being completely honest? He started by wanting to read me.

Before our time in the mind machines, I went to my beauty technicians. They tightened my skin, resheathed my hair, re-tinted the violet in my eyes, smoothed out wrinkles with tiny injections, waxed my legs and superfluous pubic hair, shaded my face to show heart-breaking cheekbones. I couldn't ask if there was a way to beat the mind-reading machine.

Home with my beauty tuned, I looked through my dresses for one Ralph seemed to like best and found one I'd forgotten, the one I'd worn

when we first met: red silk knit. *Not a wife's dress at all*, I first thought, then I reconsidered. I would add a scarf to close up the open-work top.

I left the loft in dark sunglasses. Ralph and I took a taxi up to Columbia-Presbyterian. Ralph put his hand on my knee to steady himself through a turn, but didn't say much. He was waiting for the real communication.

We went into the big buildings and found a guide to the Neuro-Psychiatry Department, then followed a post-doc through the halls to the lab.

The five lead researchers moved around in a mess of VR suits, helmets, gloves, pots of electroconducting jelly. The lab looked like a parody of an artist's lab. Or perhaps a contemporary artist's studio was a parody of this. The one woman on the team was dressed in a suit her body wasn't accustomed to. She was slightly overweight, blonde but not enhanced. The senior man wore sweat pants and a neoprene ear warmer pushed above his ears to keep his hair back. The other three wore college student jeans and shirts.

The woman was Dr. Drake, whom we could call Beth. I did precisely that, asking, "Beth, what are the VR suits for?"

She said, "The brain goes down to the fingertips. We need to read from the whole body."

VR suits were sweaty. *All that beauty work for nothing*. The senior man and Ralph huddled together, talking tech in front of the monster Cray computer that would construct my thoughts from twitching fingernails and the brain's electromagnetic currents. I asked, "Where can I hang my clothes? And do you have somewhere I can shower after?"

"I'll get a tech to show you," Beth the woman science person said. I wondered if she slept with the senior male, but then decided I didn't want to know. *Could a woman make a place without the mate?* I knew several women in the art world who weren't spousal proteges. Three were gay. Five married safe guys who supported what their wives did. Only one was ambiguously alone, not using sex for connections or support. Unmated, she was a sexual threat to or a sexual reject by both sexes. We all wanted her to fall desperately in love with one of the ruthless ambisexual boys just to see her turn human.

So, whatever this science woman was, I left with her to change into

the VR suit. She smeared my head with electroconducting jelly. The helmet's electrodes crunched through my expensive hair. I came back out to see Ralph also approaching me in another suit. *We should have flippers on our feet, I thought, we so resemble divers.*

*What is Ralph expecting?* I'd know soon.

The head scientist said, "We're going to let you see into each other's minds through the VR goggles. I'd like to remind you that this will be digital simulation of your minds, not precisely your own visual cortex constructions. You'll 'hear' each other, see what visuals you imagine."

Beth added, "It will take time to fine-tune. You both might want to lie down for a few minutes."

I'd rather have run. Would they drug me? Would they please drug me. Ralph and the chief guy scientists chatted. I slipped the VR goggles over my eyes and began adjusting the machine to my thinking, trying to see if I could image fake things.

Beth said, "Sometimes the suggestibility effect brings things to consciousness that you might not want to think about. We can cut-out if you remember anything really upsetting, give you a mild shock."

The VR goggles fed me my thought images.

"Who goes first?" Ralph asked.

"Flip a coin," I said, caught in the memory of the ex-wife's hand-done art.

Beth said, "Ralph's better calibrated."

Ralph said, "But I want to read her."

I walked into his head and found my image waiting. He was the center of the universe, an artist and a poseur, married to the only woman in the universe who knew that being the best of poseurs was an art form....

But I'd never thought he was a poseur. Ralph showed me how he'd calculated his work to cultivate the rich women who bedded him and bought his work and talked of him as their artist. Each time, he married with progressively better calculations about a wife's value. My beauty blunted husbands' fury and flattered wives in their adulteries.

We were jolted. Ralph said, "She knows this. Before we came here, she spent five hundred dollars on face and body tuning."

I was his mortal pay-back for the high status games played with kitsch art counters: the cheap-trick pastel neons and black velvet jolting

the visual cortex; the computer art stolen from gamers.

A fraud, but then that, too, is an art form. Besides, all his colleagues were frauds, too, only he was the best fraud.

*I don't think so.* But the thoughts in the goggles came only from him. A quivering eyelid, a muscle spasm in the hand, eyebrow flinches, shifts of electric currents in the brain — all these things read as visible expressions of the invisible.

Ralph said, "And you'll love me anyway." His image of me nodded.

Then, from the back of his mind, a slender river filled with fractal images began to flow. "The subconscious, are you ready for it or is there anxiety?" one male voice said.

I looked in the river and saw a thousand images better than anything he'd done. Young Ralph dissolved into his work, then I saw his memories of Raphael at the National Gallery in Washington, those sinister Madonnas and Children. Somehow, underneath it all, Ralph wasn't a fraud. The game he played was the art of sliding his images through preconceptual barriers.

And there were no other artists except for him and the great dead. Inside the self-depreciation concealed by the public ego was the private ego, a tender monster.

"Enough," Ralph said. "It isn't real, just my young self's fantasies."

So we switched. I couldn't feel or see Ralph making his way through my mind. I tried to hold on to the river he'd sent out of his subconscious, but then I remembered, trying hard not to think about it, the sloop off the Hamptons. The VR goggles began to play my own visual images. I mourned Ralph and my youth and the painted sails tattered. Then I remembered my own days in art school and felt like a bitch sharpening her teeth on other people's bones because it was easier to steal than to bring down my own deer.

*You are my artist,* I thought at Ralph. Did I ever have an image river flowing through my subconscious? I saw myself beautiful, then time carved wrinkles into my face, pulled down my bones, broke my hip, and threw me into the grave, remembered only as The Widow.

And there was no more universe after me. Hideous and deformed as Time made me, I was the true center figure of the story.

Webbed in Sargassum weed, I floated through the art world, my

beauty a lure for the bloated self behind the weeds. Ralph's fractal river floated into my sea and the images spread out. I drew them close with my wiggling lure that looked like a clitoris and ate them.

I loved Ralph's images. I hated them. My own river dried behind my eyes. The single woman artist, sexually ambiguous as ever, walked through as though neither river or sea existed and said to me, "But this was your choice, to lose what you could do."

Ralph's voice beyond my VR suit said, "Oh, but your sea is fantastic. That Sargassum fish dangling a woman in front of her huge maw."

The brain machine wasn't completely honest. In my own VR goggles, I'd seen the lure as only a body part. I rethought fiercely and Ralph said, "Ah. Marvelous, marvelous self-hate."

I realized that he'd always be the center of his universe, no matter what he saw of mine. My fierce craving to be his widow....

"Yes, your fierce craving to be my widow is your true identity," Ralph said, his voice as though his throat had engorged with blood.

We were centers of the universe, uncommunicative even when ultimately revealing. Whatever my mind put on the virtual goggles, Ralph could distort it with his own eyes and mind.

I was relieved and horrified. I'd seen too much of my own mind.

Ralph's next project, of course, was high tech and virtually real. A skeleton fucked me. I sailed on his image river, the sails his black velvet optic cheats. He led me on a leash to his adulterous patrons. On the end of a Sargassum fish's first dorsal ray, long and bent into a fishing pole, I dangled naked, luring floating panels of Raphael madonnas into the gaping fish maw.

I looked across the gallery and saw Ralph smiling through his spectacles while gallery hounds ate his images of my images of me. A line waited for the prime goggles: a huge body of Ralph sailing a Sargasso Sea, dominating its weeds and four-inch angler fish waving even tinier naked me's at him.

My mind and I were his Sargasso Sea. A sea's thoughts were more trivial than a dog's.

I can't kill him. I must outlive him.





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# PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

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## PAUL DI FILIPPO

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*You Won't Take Me Alive!*  
*(Without at Least Ten Percent*  
*of the Box Office Gross)*

“A ROMANCE writer's two-year flight from justice ended in a style befitting one of her novels this week, when law enforcement agents knocked on her door at a low-budget motel just outside Los Angeles. Rather than surrender without a struggle, Barbara Joslyn stabbed herself in the chest.

“As Federal agents closed in on her...Ms. Joslyn barricaded herself in her cramped motel room and shouted that she ‘would not be taken alive.’” — *The New York Times*, May 5, 1997.

“Let me through, I'm from the SFWA.”

As soon as the hard-eyed, big-shouldered young cop — standing intimidatingly with folded arms on

the crowd side of the yellow police tape — heard those words, he gave me a deferential nod, lifted up the plastic ribbon, and ushered me under. Even this rookie plainly knew who had saved the asses of his buddies in countless similar situations across the country. I was hoping his superiors did too.

Once on the far side of the barrier, walkie-talkies crackling practically in my ears, I found myself in the middle of a barely controlled mob. Plainclothes detectives, armored SWAT snipers, squat HAZMAT robots, reporters, priests, psychologists, editors, agents, publicists, film directors — the usual mix of do-gooders and vultures you always find at this kind of tragic scene. Using perceptions and intuitions honed from dozens of equally chaotic past confrontations, I zeroed

in on the guy most likely in charge: a smartly coiffed City Hall type wearing a suit that probably cost as much as I made in a month.

I waved my open wallet, credentials showing, under his nose. "Dorsey Kazin, SFWA Griefcom. Whadda we got here?"

Maybe it was the sight of the understatedly famous silver rocket next to my name in gold-leaf, maybe it was the calm assurance in my voice. Maybe it was the chance to dump this whole mess in somebody else's lap. Whatever the case, the guy's stern but nervous exterior collapsed faster than the Wizards of the Coast publishing program, and he spilled his fears into my tender ear like a kid telling his mother what he did that day in second grade.

"Am I glad to see you, Mr. Kazin! Ruben Spinelost here, assistant to Mayor Whiffle." I tendered the guy a perfunctory shake. "Afraid I'm in a little over my head in this dustup. Never dealt with one of these new-fangled hostage-based contract negotiations before."

I cut him off. "Get used to it, Rube, this new tactic's all the rage — and I do mean rage. Brief me quick now, before our gun-toting Gernsbackian decides to lay a few of his more violent cards on the table — or maybe his hostage's ear."

Spinelost consulted a paper. "Well, the writer involved is someone named Theodolite Sangborn. He's published — "

"Not necessary. I got everything I need to know about him along those lines out of his SFWA file. I'm an instant Sangborn expert on his whole life, from his formative childhood traumas down to how he deducted his mistress's hotel room as a convention expense on his last 1040. Not to mention his entire miserable midlist genre career. What I need from you is some idea of the kinds of demands he's making, and who he's got in there."

Spinelost used his cheat notes to answer the last question first. "He's holding his editor, a woman named Sherri Drysack. Ex-editor, I should say. Apparently she made the mistake of deciding to pay him a visit in person to offer her condolences — "

"On Bollix Books dropping Sangborn like a squirming roach when his last novel stiffed. What a damn fool! Didn't she know her presence would be like holding a lit match to a powder-keg?"

"Obviously not. I believe she's, um, fresh out of Bennington. Fine school, of course, but.... Anyway, now Sangborn is using the leverage represented by her peril to demand

a new three-book, seven-figure contract, with twenty percent royalties and assured softcover editions. Oh yes, he also wants Leapsgerb Studios to option his last book for a cool million."

I cursed eloquently. "These Heinlein wannabes with their delusions of canonical stature make me sick. They should consider themselves lucky to get a Whelan cover, like Sangborn did on his *Interstellar UPS*, never mind options and kick-in clauses. And it always falls to Griefcom to hand them a reality check."

Spinelost coughed politely. "Speaking of checks..."

"Don't get your boxers in a twist over nothing, Rube. Assuming I can bring this whole debacle to a safe conclusion mutually agreeable to all parties, the city will be fully compensated for any extraordinary expenses — as long as no charges are pressed against our author, of course. Whichever publisher picks up Sangborn will cut a check to the municipality tomorrow — and probably make a nice little donation to the FOP. It's standard industry practice now. They just write it off as a line item on the author's royalty statement."

"Very good. Still, I rather miss the old days —"

Just then a bullet zipped by over our heads like something out of Harrison's *Deathworld*. Spinelost and the other suits fell to the ground, while the rest of us hardened campaigners just groaned cynically at the requisite touch of melodrama. From the innocent-looking suburban house where Sangborn was holed up came a shouted threat.

"Hey, people! I want to see some goddamn action here, maybe a cover proof or a multi-city book-tour itinerary, and fast! Or Little Miss Blue Pencil is going to have a new buttonhole in her Donna Karan jacket!"

I patted my coat pocket to make sure my cell-phone and palmtop with speed-dialer attachment were there, then grabbed a loud-hailer from a gape-mouthed social-worker.

"Sangborn! It's Dorsey Kazin! I'm coming in for some face time. Don't shoot anymore, or these guys will put you on the remainder table faster than you can say Robert James Waller!"

Silence for a moment, before Sangborn answered. "Okay, Kazin, I trust you. But no one else!"

Handing back the hailer, I marched forward, the mob of officials falling aside respectfully to let me through.

The time spent crossing that

inevitable empty and unnaturally silent street to the writer's house is always unnerving, no matter how often you've done it before. Sure, you figure they're not gonna do anything crazy at this point, with a solution to their problems so close, but you never know for certain. I still broke out into a sweat when I remembered how my onetime partner, Alyx Jorus, had gone permanently out of print, drilled through the heart as she approached a writer involved in that hellacious work-for-hire *Star Wars* novelizations snafu. There are some cases I wouldn't touch with a ten-light-year pole.

As I crossed to Sangborn's bungalow, I tried to reassure myself by thinking of all my peers who were even now successfully and routinely doing my same job across this nation of belligerent, mad-dog writers. Those various Griefcom professionals from all the sister and brother organizations to SFWA — the guilds of the mystery writers, the romance writers, the western writers, the horror writers, the screen- and teleplay writers, even PEN — they all stood invisibly shoulder-to-shoulder with me as I strode up to Sangborn's door. So bolstering was my ghostly crew that when I got there I was able to knock

with confidence, call my name, then enter.

A disheveled Sangborn sat on the couch in the darkened living-room, semi-automatic rifle loosely gripped. (SFWA sold armaments through the *Forum* now, and had coffers overflowing with cash.) His hair was as messy as a sheaf of manuscript pages dropped in a wastebasket, his face was stubbled, and he was sweating like one of Fabio's fans getting an autograph. Perched insouciantly on the edge of a coffee-table, Sherri Drysack was, by contrast, cool as one of Anne Rice's vampires. Tucking long hair behind one perfect ear, she said, "It's about time you got here, Kazin. My Dayrunner's showing two appointments and a meeting later this afternoon, and I'm like, *hello*, can we get these negotiations moving, or are we still in like the *Stone Age*?"

"Sangborn didn't kidnap you, did he? You're in collusion with him."

"Duh, Earth to Kazin, Earth to Kazin: wake up and smell your double-latte! Of course I'm in this with him. I was planning to jump ship at Bollix all the while, and Sangborn is my meal-ticket out."

I looked at the pitiful hulk on the couch. Shoeless, his hands

shaking, his eyes redder than Mars before Robinson got his mitts on it, he looked the most unlikely prospect for success I had ever seen.

"You must have an ace in the hole. What is it?"

Drysack whipped a manuscript out of her briefcase. "Thought you'd never ask, Kazin. Here's three chapters and an outline for an open-ended series that's going to take the sf world by storm. Sangborn's going to make Niven and Pournelle look like Hall and Flint after this."

I took the handful of papers from her and started reading. After a while, I let out a genuine whistle of astonishment. "Looks like the real thing. A postmodern space opera based on an amalgam of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. Didn't think the old hack had it in him."

Drysack moved to sit beside her property, draping a possessive arm around his shoulder. She slitheringly crossed one Victoria's Secret-sheathed leg over the other. Sangborn let out a plaintive mew like a Huckle. "Oh, Theo's far from washed up. He has a lot of good years left in him. All he needs is some tender loving care from the right editor — and of course some

fat residuals on any TV series based on the Bronteverse."

I dug out my cell phone and palmtop and summoned up a list of publishers in a screen window. Having picked a likely candidate, I mated the speed-dialer and phone. While the connection was being made, I moved to one of the windows, pulled the drapes aside, and gave the all-clear sign to the cops. As they began to move in, I saw one of the figures in the crowd answer his own ringing cell-phone.

"Loomis Harmonica here. Is that you, Kazin?"

"Damn right. And I'm sitting on the hottest concept to hit sf since Asimov read Gibbon. Is the publisher of Mary Kay Books interested?"

"You bet your bottom Imperial credit we are. Put Drysack right on."

I passed the phone to the eager lady editor, then walked across the room to a shelf of liquor bottles. I poured myself an undiluted vodka, and knocked back half of it.

Hell of a way to earn a paycheck. But when the Muse calls, you gotta answer.

Especially if she's packing heat.



*There are a lot of phrases we use to describe compassion: If you could see what I see, if you could walk a mile in my boots, if you could live a week in my skin...*

*Christine Beckert is a former high school English teacher living in Massachusetts. Her short fiction has appeared in such magazines as Amazing Stories and Tales of the Unanticipated. She dedicates this story to Nancy Voneman, an instructor of nursing who provided technical information for this tale.*

# Graft

*By Christine Beckert*

“I HAVE TO DECIDE ‘BY tomorrow,” said Marie abruptly.  
“Tomorrow? Why so soon? I thought you had to build up your

resistance first or something.”

“It’s been a week — the doctor says it’s time. And there’s a new registration in, an almost perfect match, he says.”

“Oh, wow, who is it?”

Marie glared at her friend. “They didn’t tell me that, obviously. But they showed me her picture, from the neck down. She’s twenty-eight years old, and — it’s beautiful skin. The doctor said if I don’t take it now, somebody else will, right quick.”

“Well, you know my opinion. If it’d been me, I’d have signed that donor request form the first time they stuck it in front of me.”

“Yes,” sighed Marie, “I know you would’ve.”

She was lying in an isolation box in the burn ward, floating on a cushion of warm, moist, medicated air, her body packed in a gel that both

sealed her flesh as her skin used to and helped to ease the trauma caused by a fire that claimed almost sixty percent of her skin, though by some odd quirk her face had been spared.

"Sure I would. In the first place, if you use self-grafts, you'll be stuck in here two or three months, won't you?"

"At least, yes. But that's a lot better than it used to be."

Joan made a rude sound. "Big deal," she said. "You're in trouble now — now's what counts — and if you take the skin replacement, you'll be out in a week or two. Seems to me that's not only better in time, but it's got to be better medically — anything that lets you heal faster has to be better."

"The doctor agrees with you there. How do you know so much about this anyway?"

"Oh, I keep up with news like that. You never know when it'll come in useful."

Marie stared at her friend incredulously. "You've anticipated getting practically cremated by a truck going the wrong way on the freeway?"

Joan laughed. "Not quite," she said, patting the clear side of Marie's box. "But I do know I'm going to get old someday, and I want to know all my options before I need to exercise them."

As she looked at her friend, Marie supposed she should have figured that. Joan had been using anti-aging and anti-wrinkle drugs for years, most of them still rare and wildly expensive. She'd also had a tummy tuck or two and some subtle lifts here and there, and she'd visited several bizarre and very private clinics that injected her with fetal goat tissue or some such nonsense in hopes of eternal youth. None of this was covered by national insurance, but "Hey," she always said, "if you can afford it, why suffer?"

Joan had every right to be pleased with the results, Marie conceded. She was fifty years old, but looked like a woman in her twenties, thirty max. To be fair, Joan did take care of herself in other ways; she ate right, and she religiously followed the regime laid down by her personal trainer at the club. Marie was no slouch, but she did indulge in a more-than-occasional bacon and egg breakfast and often found the lure of a book more potent than her appointment at the club. But until recently she'd never been tempted by drugs or surgery. Fifty herself, strangers guessed her at forty or forty-five, and she was content with that. She liked the character

of older faces; she liked her own more than Joan's, which, though pretty, struck Marie as rather bland. Where was the *life* Joan had lived? Not in her face, that's for sure.

But recently Marie had become mildly uneasy about the rest of herself. When she spread her hand and arched her wrist backward, she could see the tiny puckerings that meant the elasticity of her skin was slipping; her chest and thighs were blossoming with tiny crosshatches she couldn't bear to call alligator skin; her arms and legs were dryer than they used to be — her over-the-counter creams apparently couldn't keep up.

And maybe it was her imagination, but Carl's eyes seemed to linger more than they used to on younger women they encountered on the streets, in restaurants, at the parties of their friends. She'd always been fully confident of Carl's fidelity, and besides, while he worked at the firm, he'd never had time for a fling — they'd had fights, in fact, Marie calling him a workaholic, Carl accusing her of being jealous of his work, work he loved, damn it, he really did. He'd surprised the hell out of her, then, when he quit two years ago, saying that's what he wanted all along, early retirement, the security and freedom to travel and do what he wanted.

To be sure, he still spent hours in his study when they were home, mesmerized by the array of electronics that kept him connected to big boards and financial houses all around the world. This was *really* fun, he claimed, doing just for their own portfolio what he used to do for others, shuffling money fast enough to earn another five or ten thou with a few taps on the keys.

"Why do you bother?" she asked, though she knew the answer. "We've got far more now than we could spend in two lifetimes."

He shrugged. "It's partly a game — I could lose it, too, you know. But I never will, not for long anyway."

That was not idle boasting, Marie knew. Carl was brilliant at what he did. When he did lose, he'd back up and look around, then carefully select the maneuvers that would not only recoup the loss but add to the account. The total was important to Carl — concrete proof of his own ability — but the game was even more important.

And he did, as promised, take more time for himself, for them. In just two years they'd been to Hawaii twice, to Paris and Moscow, to Kenya and New Zealand. But his eyes, or so it seemed to Marie, were moving around

more, too, perhaps comparing her to the young lovelies that seemed, suddenly, to dominate the landscape wherever they went.

Which is why she said now to Joan, "I think Carl wants me to go for the skin replacement."

"Honey, don't take this the wrong way," said Joan, after hesitating a moment, "but that doesn't surprise me much. You'll look twenty or thirty years younger, you know, and men are so shallow. To them, it's real important that their women look good — and that means young."

Marie shot her friend a glance, but Joan, incapable of irony, seemed unaware of the obvious corollary, that women who acquiesced in this judgment must be equally shallow.

"How about the girls? What do they think?" Joan was asking now.

"They agree with Carl," said Marie, but she didn't elaborate, and Joan knew better than to pursue the subject. Denise and Suzanne had flown in right after the accident, but neither could bear to see their mother floating in that box — so they claimed — and after hearing that Marie would be fine regardless of what she decided, they whizzed off again, with promises of their undying support if Marie needed it. They were both still single, both corporate lawyers, and the joy of Carl's life. But Marie found, to her abiding dismay, that as the years passed she had less and less to say to her daughters.

"Everybody thinks I should go ahead with it," she cried now in some despair. "Everybody but me. I just don't think it's *right*!"

Joan scrambled at the plastic, as if reaching for her friend's hand. "Honey, we've talked about this before, but that was in the abstract. I told you then I thought you were nuts. But it's not abstract anymore, and now I *really* think you're nuts!"

"But, Joan, I'd be getting somebody else's *skin*, and she'd be getting *this*!" Marie couldn't gesture, but it was clear what she meant, the badly burned remnants of skin that would take months to regenerate enough self-grafts, even with the labs that speeded up the process by growing cells into patches off-site, so to speak.

"She volunteered for this, you know; you aren't stealing anything from her. Quite the contrary — you'll be paying her a small fortune."

"It still doesn't seem right," insisted Marie. "Just because I have money, why should I be able to buy someone's skin — or eyes or breast or kidney, for that matter."

"For heaven's sake, Marie, it's perfectly legal. You can sell anything you want that doesn't disable you and put you on the public dole."

"Legal, shmeagal, that doesn't make it *right*!"

"Why not? Some people sell their *kids*, for crissake. That's what those private adoptions add up to, you know."

"So who says that's right either?"

"Okay, well, how about a poor artist? She might paint a masterpiece, something she *knows* is really good, but if she's poor enough she'll sell it for a pittance, won't she?"

"That's not the same either."

"I don't see why not. A person has something you want, and that person wants your money — that's what makes the world go 'round, my friend."

Marie felt frustrated — she just couldn't seem to find the words that would convince Joan there was at least a moral point worth discussing here. For now, she gave up. "I guess I'll have to think about it."

"You said it yourself, kid — you're out of thinking time. You've got to make up your mind that this is the right thing for you to do." Joan rose. "Well, I better get going and let you get some rest." She leaned over and kissed the top of Marie's box near her face. "But I'll love you either way — you know that, don't you?"

Sudden tears sprang to Marie's eyes. "I do, Joan, and — thanks." She watched Joan's retreating back. There were times, she knew, when she judged Joan harshly, when she wondered why she bothered with someone of so few interests, so little depth. But it was Joan, wasn't it, who wasn't repelled by Marie's gel-packed body, who spent hours chatting with her here in the hospital, who *touched* her, or what passed for touching sealed away as she was in this box.

Carl didn't do any of that. Later that day, as usual, he spent his second fifteen-minute visit pacing about nervously, unable to maintain a coherent conversation, to more than glance at her in the isolation box. "The yen fell today," he was saying, though fully aware that Marie couldn't care less, "but we were out of there anyway. The Eurodollar should stay strong for a couple months, though."

Marie watched him, the light from the setting sun making his skin glow strong and gold. His skin was one of the things that had drawn her

to him, so many years ago, his naturally golden skin that seemed to promise dreams and soft riches, like sunshine. He was poor then but he already acted rich, and the combination of events that made him truly rich seemed to let him grow into his skin so that it matched his bank account, a literal embodying of golden riches.

Now he hesitated. "Look, Marie," he said finally, not looking at her, "I'm not trying to put any pressure on you, you've got to make your own decision, but if you decide on self-grafts, if you're going to be stuck here for a few months — well, I think I'll go on to Switzerland for a while. There's a conference I thought I might attend, and maybe I could look for that chalet we were talking about buying. No, don't say it — " He raised a hand, though Marie had said nothing — "I know I shouldn't, but — darling — you know I can't stand hospitals. It's stupid and low, I know, but I can't help it."

Marie knew that was true. When Carl's own mother had been dying of cancer in this same hospital, it was Marie who'd come to sit with the woman, to tell her all about what Carl was doing. Carl's mother was hurt, Marie could see that, but she couldn't criticize her golden boy any more than Marie could.

Now he chatted brokenly about other things, and Marie murmured appropriate responses. Even after he was gone, she saw him, at meetings with bright young go-getters in silk dresses and suits, sipping toddies in firelit resorts, being shown through houses by real estate agents in elegant wool skirts slashed to the hip. She saw the taut, beautiful, *youthful* skin of the donor.

"Oh, god," groaned Joel. "I love your skin."

They were lying on Annie's bed in her cramped apartment, and Joel was writhing sensuously, dramatically, along the length of her, his hand flowing across her like the wave of a gentle surf.

Annie took a deep breath. She'd figured this was the best time to tell him, when they were both warm and mellow from love, but now she felt too full herself to risk the moment. But she had to sometime, so —

"I'm going ahead with it, Joel."

His hand froze a millimeter above her belly, a tiny, terrible charge electrifying the space, reigniting a desire she resisted. "You went back to

Donor Net?" he asked, his voice heavy and dull. She nodded.

Suddenly he was on his knees, one leg on either side of her, looking down at her. "So what's it to be," he demanded. "One of your beautiful eyes — " and his thumbs gently closed her eyes and brushed across them. "Or your breasts, are you giving these to some rich bitch with cancer —" but his hands weren't as harsh as his words as they gently cupped and fondled her breasts. "Or will it be your hair, are you giving up your scalp to someone who yearns for this glory?" He picked up handfuls of her long, silky black hair and crushed it gently in his hands and buried his face in it.

Then he dropped his hands, her hair. "Well?"

"My — my skin, Joel. I'm going to sell my skin."

For a moment he stared at her in incomprehension. Then — "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

At that she rolled angrily off the bed and snatched for her clothes. "There's a woman — she was burned — she's willing to pay a fortune for my skin."

Joel continued to stare at her. "Are you out of your fucking mind?" he repeated.

"Stop saying that!" Annie screamed. "I know what I'm doing."

"Annie? Annie? Is anything wrong?" came an anxious voice from the next room.

"Oh, shit, now we've woken Mom. It's okay," Annie called. "Joel and I just — disagree about something."

Joel grabbed at her as she was about to pull on her jeans, pulled her back on the bed, and stroked her arm. "I just can't believe it," he whispered, stricken. "I just can't believe you'd even consider selling this."

"Don't be such a child, Joel," she said, pulling away again. "Where else can I make that kind of money?"

"Beg it, borrow it, steal it — I don't know, anything!"

"If I begged or borrowed — that's even if I could — I'd eventually have to pay it back, and how would I do that? And, sorry, but I don't know how to steal that much."

"But, Annie, your *skin*! What would you get in its place?"

"Some chunks of charred skin." Joel gagged — not an act. Annie felt like gagging herself, but she reached out to pat Joel's head. "It's not as bad

as it sounds," she said, wondering who she was trying to convince. "Just a few months of waiting for self-grafts and lab grafts and regeneration. I'll be as good as new. She's older — the burned woman — but the doctor says my younger genes will tighten it up and make it young again as it grows in."

"I still don't see why you can't just put your mother in a nursing home, Annie."

"We've been over this before, Joel. She'd die there, I know she would. She's said so herself a thousand times — she's terrified of the very idea." Annie thought of the hours and hours of conversation with her mother, as the Lou Gehrig's disease got progressively worse, as she needed more and more care. No way could Annie's income from waitressing stretch to cover a fulltime nurse while she was away, not on top of the apartment, clothes for the kids, food, the phone bill. No way.

The government was no help. If Mom went to the nursing home, everything would be paid for — room and board, medical care, everything. But out of the nursing home, at most she'd qualify for a visiting nurse to stop in once a day, not good enough very soon when she wouldn't be able to get a drink of water or go to the bathroom by herself. Something had to happen *now*.

"Why's she so scared of the nursing home anyway? It's not a snake pit."

"Her mind's still good, Joel, and she sees herself turning into a vegetable if she goes. She keeps talking about her own mother. Gram was totally different, her mind was gone, but that's the image Mom has, this vacant, drooling face looking up at her from a wheelchair. To this day she feels guilty about putting Gram in there."

"So why did she?"

"Same reason as me — she couldn't afford to give up work to stay with Gram, but even with work, she couldn't afford the extra help."

Joel sighed deeply, then fell silent for a while. She could feel him watching as she slipped on her silk bra and buttoned up her buttery yellow silk blouse. She loved the feel of silk, like a constant kiss on her skin — it was her one extravagance.

"What do the kids think?" Joel asked at last.

"I haven't told them yet."

"Omigod." Silence. Then — "How long you gonna be away?"

"Two or three months. They'll have to go to a foster home."

"They won't like that, especially Sam."

Annie shrugged. Ten-year-old Sam had been a problem recently, but he was smart; he'd understand. As for seven-year-old Beth, she'd brood and cry and stroke herself, but she'd survive. Things could be worse — had been far worse before Annie had kicked their abusive father out of the house three years ago. Sam still had nightmares about Frank, but she thought Beth had pretty well gotten beyond it except for her moodiness.

"What about your mom?"

Annie busied herself at the mirror with her hair. "Well, that's the hard part. She will have to go into a nursing home while I'm away. I've got to convince her it's the only way, that it's just for a little while."

"Look, babe, much as I love you, I'm not going to volunteer to stay here with her. I've got my own work to do."

Joel sounded surly, but Annie knew the surliness masked his frustration that he couldn't make it right for her. In the months she'd known Joel, he'd been generous to her and the kids and even to Mom — but his treats were small because he had so little himself, the proceeds from his few sales barely supporting his drafty studio downtown and supplies of precious paint. "I wouldn't ask you to stay, Joel. But — "

"Well?"

Annie closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and then turned to him, appeal naked in her eyes. "Could you — do you think you could visit her while I'm gone? She's got to be convinced she's gonna get out."

"Hoo, boy," breathed Joel, resistance flickering in his eyes.

Annie stiffened. "I'm not really asking much, you know. I just thought if you could — "

"Well, wait a minute here. I haven't said no. It's just not something I ever planned on when I fell for you, you know, that I'd be visiting your mother in a nursing home. If you're gonna make so much money, why don't you just get nurses here?"

"They're giving me a third up front, a third after the procedure, and a third when I'm released. The first third'll just cover the kids and the rent. And if I borrow against what I'm getting, with the interest, there won't be anything left when I get out."

"Hoo, boy."

Everything in Annie screamed against what she was doing — selling her skin in the first place, farming out Mom and the kids to make it happen, putting this burden on Joel, the first good guy she'd met since she'd kicked Frank out. She must be crazy. But....

"Okay, I'll try. I can't promise it'll be every day or that I can stay the course — but I'll try. And I won't just run on you. I'll let you know if...things change."

A rush of pure gratitude and love swept through Annie, and she turned and gathered Joel in her arms.

"There's a condition," he said slowly.

She looked at him, not tense yet but prepared to stiffen.

"Put 'em off a day or two and come down to the studio and let me paint you nude."

Annie thought about this. She'd resisted his invitations before, out of a natural shyness — not directed at Joel but at the strangers who might see her and leer at her if Joel sold the work.

"Your skin — " he was saying brokenly. "Your beautiful skin. I want it on my canvas, at least, before it belongs to someone else." He ran his fingers along her arm, causing the tiny hairs under the silk to electrify her skin.

Annie put her own hands on Joel's still naked flesh, felt him react to her touch. "Yes," she whispered, "okay, but first I'll give you a private audience *here and here and here.*"

Joel groaned and reached for the buttons of her just-donned clothes.

**H**OW WEIRD, thought Marie distantly, to be so pampered here in the Wilcox Wing of the hospital. She'd lived her whole life in a number of houses within five miles of here, she'd been in the hospital three times, with appendicitis as a child, then when the girls had been born, but she'd always before been in the regular wards. There was no problem with that, she'd had wonderful care, she would never have questioned it if she'd woken up there after leaving intensive care, but she had to admit the Wilcox Wing, which tendered an extra bill separate from the basic care charged to the government, was awfully nice.

The private room had a French door that opened on a balcony where pots of spring flowers flourished. More flowers crowded the room itself,

furnished like an elegant hotel. Nurses kept watch via an array of equipment from a central station and looked discreetly in on Marie every so often, withdrawing when she didn't need anything. When she did, they were prompt at bringing her books, something to drink, help in moving about.

The gel was gone and so was the isolation box. For a few days the skin had been puffy with the trauma it had undergone — the two women, unconscious, had lain side by side on their cushions of air while the surgeons made their tidy cuts and slipped off the other woman's skin and what skin Marie had left, had exchanged them like slipping the contents of one envelope into another, had tidily sewed Marie up and taken her to Wilcox to recover.

And by now she felt amazingly good, with very little pain. The skin was tight still — the donor had been remarkably close to her in height and weight, but her body was distributed differently. With each passing day, however, her own body was generating a few new cells and she was diligent about the exercises they taught her in therapy. In a month or two, they said, she'd never know the difference.

She spent hours staring at herself. Everything from the shoulders down was new, was the skin of a woman she didn't know, would never know. But now it was hers.

She refused to think of the other woman, down there in an isolation box in intensive care for a couple months to come, waiting for Marie's frayed skin slowly, slowly to build itself up enough to be grafted elsewhere, for the meager patches to be sent on from the lab.

No, she wouldn't think of that.

She'd think of the rekindled light in Carl's eyes when he came to visit her after the surgery, after the initial swelling had diminished, of his almost prurient interest in the line between her old flesh and her new — not a stark line but one softened by the surgeon's skill, blending in the slightly different colors of the two skins — in her breasts, clothed in new flesh, in her new nipples that had not nursed her daughters though they'd nursed someone's children, in her lower parts — What...what did they do there? asked Carl, licking his lips, swaying a little when she told him.

Still, every now and then Marie shivered, uncontrollably, as if something in her wanted to shake off this skin. When she thought of her mother, for instance —

Mom had had a heart transplant, which failed after six months. But what a glorious, ghastly six months it'd been, while Mom pondered her joy in her continued existence compared with her knowledge that her donor was dead, victim of random violence on the city streets. She felt like a thief in the night, Mom said, a ghoul feasting on life, and yet when she died, her last words were of her gratitude to a dead man for the gift of six months.

In her memory, Marie's father had lavished pots of money on a donor registry lobbying for changes in the law. Those changes came, though ironically, to Marie's thinking, there was too much squeamishness about the presumed consent plan, whereby organs from the dying could be used unless the person had specifically denied permission. Far less threatening, in most people's eyes, was the capitalist system: One could donate organs, or sell them, but would never be required to give them up.

At any rate, Marie and her father went on with their lives, closer, perhaps, than most fathers and daughters. Partly that was because Marie was only fourteen at the time and couldn't understand why there wasn't another heart for her mother, and another and another and another if need be. Partly it was because they liked each other a great deal.

Just about the only disappointment each suffered in the other was Marie's decision to become a teacher. She was hurt when her father wasn't thrilled, after all his lectures about the duty to give something back to society, and he was hurt when she didn't leap to carry on with him at the shoe plant he'd founded and fostered. Marie's feelings were rather soon soothed, as her father's interest and pride in her work grew, and her pain was sharp when, after he sold the plant, the new owner broke it up for its assets and laid off the two hundred employees who'd worked so loyally for her father.

Marie blamed herself, but her father didn't. By then he could say to her and mean it, "No, no, my dear. You belong in the classroom. You're a natural teacher. Every year you're touching a hundred different lives, and that's what matters, that's what counts."

He didn't take the break-up well himself; every day, it seemed to Marie, he became grayer and slower and more silent.

It was the closest she came to leaving Carl, whom she'd married by then. Despite the courtesy and sympathy he gave Marie's father when they were together, when he was alone with her he admitted his impatience. "It was the right thing to do," he insisted. "That old plant wasn't

anywhere close to efficient. His name lives on, you know — the shoes are just made in China, much more efficiently."

"But what about those two hundred workers?" Marie asked bleakly. "Doesn't 'efficiency' mean taking advantage of them, using them and discarding them just for a paper profit?"

"That's not the right spin," said Carl. "They'll find other work — or else they don't deserve to. But capital has to act for itself, for stockholders, or nothing gets done. Can't you see that?"

Marie couldn't, no.

Soon after that her father came to live with them, a gray man who sat at the dinner table and watched TV in the evening without saying a whole lot. Carl would talk enthusiastically about various maneuvers at the brokerage house where he worked, and Dad listened politely and then asked, "But what do you *do*, what do you make that *means* anything?"

"We do it all," Carl said, but Dad shook his head — Marie didn't know whether he was denying Carl or the system or his own life, but he didn't live long enough for her to find out for sure. He died five years after he sold the business, but while the doctors ruled it a heart attack, Marie called it heartbreak.

What he left in his will, combined with their savings, Carl parlayed into a bigger and bigger fortune, shifting it here and there as the financial boards moved up and down. Marie paid little attention after the first, when she'd asked, "Dad would hate this, wouldn't he?" and Carl shrugged. "Yes," he said, "and that's why his business was worth more dead than alive."

Something was wrong with that logic, Marie knew, but she didn't know what.

She'd taken family leave to care for her dad during his last few months, then, when they discovered Carl's mother's cancer, he persuaded her not to return to work. He was honest and humble in his appeal. "You did it for your dad," he said. "Please — help me. When I was a kid my grandad was in the hospital with cirrhosis, and they made me go see him every week. It was horrible, watching his stomach swell and his face puff out. I just couldn't take it, Marie, when it's my mom in there."

His mother lived another six years, alternating between complete health and horrible sickness, between losing her hair and regaining it,

between determination to beat the disease and maudlin, drunken acquiescence in her own death. In the meantime, though Marie fiercely missed her work and her students and her colleagues, she gradually built another life for herself, centered on Carl and the girls, on the country club and the health club, on Carl's mother and on volunteering at the arts center, on the vagaries of her own existence. After Mother Lou died, Marie thought she was fully prepared to go back to work, but school systems were no longer particularly interested in her, preferring younger teachers swarming fresh from college with the newest theories. Carl himself urged her not to bother — "I'm making enough for both of us" — and Marie's biorhythms were by now attuned not to early rising and a bell schedule, but to tennis tournaments at the club and various theatrical and sports events the girls insisted she absolutely had to attend.

She and Carl had been young and poor when the girls were born, and she'd taken minimum leave to have them, hire a sitter, and get back to work. But about the time when her father came to live with them, Carl began to campaign for private schools. "With the board your dad's paying us and our income, we can afford it," he insisted.

"That's not the point. If people like us don't support the public schools, who will? The school's great here anyway."

But Marie lost that argument when the girls themselves chimed in in favor of private school. From the beginning, Carl had fostered in them a sense of their own worth, an effort Marie mostly applauded, though his purchases of designer clothes for them when they were still in grade school irritated her no end. And he had also insisted on enrolling them in skating lessons and piano lessons and special computer classes when the family was still struggling just to meet the mortgage.

Since Marie had given in to all of this, she knew she shouldn't have been shocked when all three of them voted for private school, but she was, she was profoundly hurt and shocked, feeling the decision a slap to all she'd worked for. But she was outgunned and knew it, and so she held her tongue.

Since then, she'd done little to merit her daughters' esteem, though Carl had no complaints that she knew of. It was a funny feeling, now, to accept her daughters' gushing approval of her new skin, her healing body. She hadn't done anything to warrant the praise, and yet — how sweet it

was to feel Denise's kiss, to hold Suzanne in her arms and know they accepted her as one of them.

Marie ran her hands over her skin — someone's skin — no, *her* skin and reveled in its taut golden health.

**S**IX WEEKS LATER Annie still lay packed in gel in an isolation box, bored out of her skull. And in between bouts of boredom came niggling worries about what was going on outside. She'd waited until the last minute to tell Sam and Beth what was going to happen, and that was a real mistake. Beth had begun to tremble violently, but Annie was distracted from comforting her by having to try to talk rationally to Sam who, white and raging, got all macho and protective and tried to forbid her to go through with it. And despite her daily phone calls to the kids assuring them that she was all right, the tears and anger continued in the foster home, until now the foster mother claimed she was at the end of her rope and threatened to take the kids to Protective Services. Annie had to plead with her to try again, to please try to understand their worries and help them get through this.

The situation at the nursing home wasn't much better. Annie was allowed to call only at certain times, but every day her mother complained about the food, the regime, the antiseptic smell masking other, even less desirable odors. Every day she raged that Annie had tricked her and planned to leave her here forever. Every day she burst into tears and asked if Annie were coming to get her.

Yet that wasn't the worst of it. The worst, it seemed to Annie, was that every day her mother's complaints and rages and tears sounded a little paler, a little more tepid. Annie strained in her isolation box, ignoring the nurse waiting impatiently to disconnect the speaker phone, willing gumption back into her mother.

The floor supervisor at the home assured Annie that her mother was fine, but even so, the combination of boredom and worry was taking its toll on Annie. At least her healing was going well. The grafts should be completed in a few weeks and then after another couple weeks she'd be free, but she thought she might lose her mind in the interim.

Joel's visits were the only bright spots. At first he'd had trouble even coming in the room, then resisted looking at her in her box, then become fascinated with the sight of her floating there covered in the yellowish gel. He even insisted on watching one day as machinery sluiced away the ointment so the doctors could reach their gloved hands through the self-sealing portals to clip small pieces of new skin and move them elsewhere, to augment these with patches grown in the lab.

The grafts had been about two-thirds complete the day Joel watched, and even with her limited vision down the length of her body, Annie agonized at what he was seeing: chunks of still raw flesh not yet seeded with new skin; bizarre islands of mottled, puffy skin in some places, remnants of the burned woman's skin, expanding outward as it regenerated; palely pink skin where grafts had been moved and taken hold.

The next day Joel brought his sketch pad and asked if he could bring his oils. Annie wasn't altogether sure she wanted to be painted even in the box — she absolutely refused to let him paint her degelled, as it were — but she figured she owed him big time for overcoming his distaste for hospitals to visit both her and her mom.

He was frowning and moody as he set up his easel, but Annie didn't ask; she wouldn't go looking for more bad news.

"I sold a painting yesterday," he said abruptly as he began to squirt paint onto his palette. He didn't look at her.

Annie was confused. "Well, that's great — isn't it?"

"Sure. It was the one of Diego and the dog, remember?"

Annie did. She'd been with Joel, as a matter of fact, when they came upon the skinny, homeless boy sitting huddled in front of a jewelry store with one arm around a bony dog and the other leaning on his knee, holding a cup. Joel immediately offered the boy a couch in his cramped studio for a couple days if he'd let Joel paint him, and the boy agreed. Then Joel wanted to get him down to Protective Services, find a home for him, but Diego slipped away that night and Joel never saw him again. In the painting Joel had replaced the jewelry store — too obvious, he said — with a bare, board fence. Diego and the dog were recognizably themselves, but their bodies were angled somehow, their joints out of kilter, clashing with the city towers rising like a fantasy land behind the fence.

Annie knew the painting was one of the best Joel had ever done, and

so did the gallery owner who occasionally hung one of his works, though she mostly dealt with already up and coming artists.

So now Annie's voice was soft as she said, "That's wonderful, Joel. That painting deserves —"

"Julie was embarrassed when she called. The guy offered half what I wanted for it."

Annie sucked in her breath. "Oh, Joel, half?"

Joel still hadn't looked at her. "I had to take it, Annie. The landlord was threatening to kick me out of the studio unless I came up with the back rent."

Annie willed away the tears she felt threatening; she couldn't let Joel see them. "You never know, Joel. Maybe that guy, the buyer, maybe he saw everything in that picture. Maybe he really couldn't afford more."

"Maybe," said Joel savagely. "Or maybe he's the husband of the woman who bought your skin." He made a vicious stab at the canvas before him, but then — "Ah, I can't work today" — slammed the palette into his case and strode over to stare out the window.

"Come here, Joel. Sit by me for a while," said Annie.

Joel did so, leaning forward so that his arms and head lay draped across Annie's box. She wanted to leap out and hold him, wrap him in her protective gel so that both of them would be out of it and safe for a while.

Joel raised his head enough to rest it on his wrists. He looked down at her, untouchable yet eerily close.

"Your mom thinks I'm part of the conspiracy, you know."

"Wha-a-at?"

"Yeah. She's starting to say you're trying to get rid of her on my account, and my visits are just a smoke screen."

"But that doesn't make any sense!"

Joel shrugged and sat up wearily.

"Joel, please! Please don't give up! Please — go back and reason with her."

"Sure, Annie, for all the good it'll do."

After Joel left, Annie called the nurse to dial the phone, but, she was told, her mother was asleep just then. Five minutes later the nurse was back. "Call for you," she said, and toggled a switch on the speaker near Annie's box.

"Yes, yes?" Annie called out eagerly. "Is that you, Mom?"

"No, Ma'am, this is Officer Rakowski at the Twelfth Precinct. We got a young man named Sam here who says he's your son."

"Omigod! What's he done? Is he in trouble?"

"Not yet, but he will be soon if he keeps running with the kids we found him with. Some of them are into deep shit. But today somebody's gotta pick Sam up and sign for him."

"But, Officer, I'm in the hospital, and the people he's staying with, I don't think they'll come get him. Please, Officer, could you bring him here, to the hospital, and I'll see he gets home?"

"Sorry, Ma'am, it's not policy — "

"Please!" Annie was almost weeping.

The man paused. "Well, it's strictly against policy, but I'm on my way out anyway. All right, what room you in?"

It took only about fifteen minutes, but to Annie the time seemed to expand into a bubble of eternity, a bubble that broke instantly when Sam burst into the room, took one horrified look at Annie, and bolted, screaming incoherently.

"Hold it there! Hold it!" said the officer, grabbing him. "Isn't that your mother?" He looked none too happy himself, his eyes anywhere but on Annie.

"No, she's not!" screamed Sam. "That's not my mother!"

"Sam!" Annie called, scrabbling futilely at the side of the box. "Sam, it's okay, baby. Come here. Look at me."

Sam resisted a moment longer, but then something in him seemed to collapse. He turned slowly and shuffled toward the box. He kept his eyes on the floor.

"Look at me, baby," said Annie quietly. "Look at me."

Sam did so.

"I didn't want you to see me like this, honey. But you've got to understand. It's real hard in here — but it's even harder being away from you. If I have to worry about you, it'll be impossible for me, can't you see that? I need your help, Sam!"

Sam still looked defiant. "You don't need my help. You wouldn't even listen when I said not to do this, and now look at you — you're a freak."

"You know why I did it, Sam, why I *had* to do it. It's the system, Sam, just buying and selling, that's all."

"Yeah, well, the system sucks. That's what the guys say."

"What guys? The ones — "

"Yeah. The Green Dragons."

"A gang? Oh, Sammy, no — "

"The system sucks," Sam repeated, glaring at Annie and then at the officer, who was still in the room.

Annie took a deep breath. "You're right, Sam, it does," she said, startling the boy into looking back at her. "But it works, Sam, can't you see that? I know I look funny here, but I'm fine, really, and I'll be out of here soon, and we'll be together again. It *works*, Sam."

Sam looked doubtful, but Annie rushed on before he could speak.

"And I do need your help, Sam. I need you to be strong and look after Beth. She's so little she can't understand, but you can, can't you Sam? You can understand and help me with Beth, can't you?"

Sam wavered for a moment, and then threw himself across the box much like Joel had done earlier. "Oh, Mom, I just want to go home!"

"Shh, shh, baby, so do I. It won't be long now, shh."

Annie let him lie there for a few minutes before she called to the policeman. "Officer, the duty nurse has my wallet. Would you ask her to give Sam some cab money — "

"I'll take him back, Ma'am. Don't you worry. And Sam and me, we'll have a nice chat on the way."

Relief gleamed in Annie's eyes.

Annie didn't sleep much that night, despite the sedatives wafted in with the antibiotics and pain killers. The box felt as if it had shrunk. She wanted to scream and pound its walls, but since that was impossible, she lay there and thought about death, about how terrible and beautiful death would be.

Marie preened before the mirror, admiring herself in the designer dress Carl had bought for her homecoming day. The high collar hid the faint line of demarcation that would be with her the rest of her life, but her bare arms and legs glowed golden against the silk sheen of the dress.

There were only two small problems. Her own mirror pointed out the first: Her face with its fine crosshatches and lines that didn't smooth out when she stopped smiling or frowning, that face no longer matched her

body. But, the doctors assured her, the discrepancy would even out. The body caring for this new skin was no longer young; it would, in time — how long depended on her own genes and overall health — in time it would look like that of a middle-aged woman, just like her face.

And that was the second problem.

But here was Carl, proudly holding out his arm for her. In a few weeks, he'd told her, love in his eyes and voice — she didn't doubt its veracity — soon, when she was well enough to travel, they'd go to Switzerland. She'd love the house he'd found. It was perfect, near the slopes of a posh resort but private enough to be a love nest for his baby and him. Marie was surprised at how something within her, her heart or her stomach, had lurched at his choice of words.

She recognized the name of the resort; that was where Joan went every few years for massage and mud baths and injections of mysterious youth serums. Marie would make an appointment now, for next year, and reserve a place as often as the experts there recommended, as far into the future as they'd make appointments.

For this first trip, Carl would have to be patient a little longer. She'd already arranged with Joan's plastic surgeon to take care of her face.

But before she acted on any of these plans, she would have a second honeymoon with Carl right in their own bedroom. She would take off all her clothes and let his hands and eyes rove her skin; she'd tangle him in its golden net.

Before she'd checked into the hospital, Annie treated herself to one thing: a silk outfit of sunshine gold with flowing pants and a loose top that responded to her slightest movement with liquid grace.

Unfortunately, she had to rely on the mirror to assure her that it was as beautiful as it had been when she'd bought it. She remembered the soft, sleek feel of it as it floated or clung to her body —

— but she couldn't feel it now.

The doctors had warned her that the tiny nerves that cause the skin to feel pain and delight, that those would be transferred with her skin, where they would likely dig into the recipient's system and make themselves at home. But that woman's nerves were gone, on the sixty percent of flesh that fire had claimed. It was an iffy thing, the doctors said;

the severed ends of Annie's own nerves might regenerate and worm their way into her new skin — or they might not. Or they might do so haphazardly, restoring feeling in one breast but not the other, for example.

So far that had not happened, but be patient, the doctors said; these things take time.

Be patient, that's what the staff at the nursing home said, too, when Annie went there directly from the hospital to pick her mother up. She'd continued to deteriorate physically, they said, but that was only to be expected. But something seemed to give way in her mind, as well, something not connected to the disease.

Her mother just stared at Annie when Annie hugged her; she didn't react to Annie's tears or Annie's pleas.

She was little better in the weeks since they'd all come home. She talked a little, finally, but mostly in monosyllables. Yes, she'd like to watch TV, she'd say if asked; no, she didn't want a glass of wine.

Annie was shocked at how *small* her mother looked, at the eyes that seemed to avoid focusing on Annie. Her mother acted like one mortally betrayed, and Annie ranged from rage to guilt but forged her public face into a solid front of good cheer.

A practical nurse now stayed with Annie's mother while Annie was at work. Her charge was no trouble, the nurse insisted, asking only to be moved from time to time, or for a different program on TV.

The children were much better, after a brief period of acting out. Annie wore slacks and long sleeves despite the summer heat pressing cruelly on the apartment, so Beth forgot, in time, that her mother had been gone. A few days after their return, Sam asked to see, and after a moment's hesitation, Annie pushed up her sleeve and held out an arm for him.

He'd hissed and looked away, then looked back and up at her. Then he nodded and Annie rolled down her sleeve. She knew better than to hug him then, but later, when she was tucking him into bed, she did, she hugged him fiercely as he sobbed on her shoulder.

Neither of them ever referred to her skin again.

Then there was Joel. He had brought Annie home from the hospital in a cab, treating her reverently, solicitously, as if she were made of spun glass. Then he stopped in once a day, awkward and uneasy until the day he grabbed Annie's hands and drew her into her bedroom and took off her

clothes with quick, nervous hands and gazed at the expanses of taut, shiny white skin, at the puckers where grafted skin met skin unharmed in the fire.

"Will it — will it even out?" he asked, his eyes on hers.

"No. "

He reached out a trembling finger to trace a line across her arm, and then with a sound she could not translate as a sob or a groan or a growl, he fumbled off his own clothes and seized her and made love in a way that made Annie cry out because she knew he was not making love to her but to his idea of himself as someone to whom such a superficial thing as skin meant nothing.

She cried, too, because while she as a person responded as she always had to Joel, her skin did not. She felt his roving hands as pressure, but not as hands of love. She gently held his head as he feathered kisses across her neck and stomach and hips, but that was her only clue that they were being bestowed. She welcomed him inside her and felt *that*, but not the warmth of his tongue on her breast.

They pushed to come together, as if willing pleasure from a duty.

Since that first time, lovemaking had settled into something resembling their old habits, though Annie concealed how little her flesh responded to Joel's touch. But she simultaneously felt feverish and a chill wind — not arising from the fan he had set up next to the bed — when he described to her the triptych he planned: Annie, headless, before the skin exchange; Annie in the box; Annie now.

"God, I love your skin," he whispered, running his hand down the length of her in a sweet, seductive search she could not resist. She closed her eyes to his touch and her ears to a tiny voice inside her that screamed with loss and rage.



*Although we're a few months away from the weekend when our clocks spring ahead one hour, it's not too early to think about such matters. Time, after all, does not stand still.*

*The prolific Ian Watson certainly doesn't stand still, either. The most recent of his many books include Oracle, Hard Questions, and The Books of Mana.*

# The Boy Who Lost an Hour, the Girl Who Lost Her Life

*By Ian Watson*

**T**ONY WOKE WITH SUCH A start. Light from the full moon flooded through the window of his bedroom at the side of the bungalow. Moonlight clearly lit the Donald Duck clock on the wall. The clock hung higher than Tony could reach, unless he stood on a chair. Little hand between three and four. Big hand at the bottom. Half-past three.

Panic seized him. He jerked up his left wrist. On his new Aladdin watch the big hand was at the bottom but the little hand pointed between two and three. It was half-past two by his wristwatch. Despite Daddy's promise, despite Tony's own vows, he'd woken up too late. Daddy must have tiptoed around the house at two ay-em. He had come in here, but he hadn't wakened Tony.

Aunt Jean, who always wore Jeans, had given Tony the watch the day before for his fifth birthday. He was Big Five. Soon he'd be starting real school. Pride was one reason why he kept the watch on when he went to

bed. But mainly, if he took it off, he might forget exactly where it was when the time came to change all the clocks.

At the birthday party he had gone round showing the wristwatch to Tim and Michael and Sarah and the others just a bit too much, until Sarah and Tim had thrust their own presents at him a second time, as if he hadn't liked those enough: the toy police car, the bendy dinosaur...

Home wasn't big enough to hold a party in. In the wooden community hall along the road there'd been balloons and cakes and musical chairs and pass-the-parcel and a magic-man. When he went to bed Tony had been so tired. He'd asked for his curtains to stay open. Mummy said the moon would keep him awake later on. Maybe she thought he was scared of the dark. Oh no. He hadn't wanted Daddy to need to switch on the light at two, and dazzle him. Because the curtains were open, before he fell asleep Tony had seen the real police car cruise slowly past. It had stopped by the high wall of the huge house along the road where children lived who were odd because they didn't have Mummies and Daddies.

From the bottom of the bed, Big Bear and Little Bear stared at Tony now with glittery eyes. The birds hadn't started their chorus yet. It was so quiet. Tony squirmed along the duvet toward the bears. Pressing himself right up against the window, he stared at his Aladdin watch again.

It was half-past two for Tony. It was half-past three for Daddy and Mummy and the rest of the world.

The top bit of window was open for air because the weather was warm earlier this year than usual. He heard a voice calling softly, "Hey there!"

When Mummies and Daddies came to collect their children from the party, they stood around for a while drinking glasses of wine.

"This is the night, isn't it? It is forward, not back — ?"

"Do we lose an hour or do we gain — ?"

"Look: when it's two o'clock it becomes three o'clock. We're an hour ahead of where we were. So it stays dark longer in the morning — "

"Seven o'clock is really six o'clock — "

Wine could make grown-ups silly. They seemed to be getting heated up about nonsense, but this was important to Tony in view of his new Aladdin watch. During the magic show Aunt Jean had been sipping wine at the back of the hall with Mummy and Daddy. Now she was sitting on

her own. So Tony asked her about this business of "changing the clocks."

She'd laughed. "I'm not sure a child can follow this! Grown-ups get flummoxed enough. Foreigners must think we're crazy, unless the same thing happens in their own countries. Well, in our country twice a year the time changes. Spring forward, Fall back: that's how you remember. Fall's another name for Autumn, you see."

No, he didn't see.

"Because in the Autumn all the leaves fall off the trees. That's when time goes back an hour. The original idea was to make the world lighter on winter mornings. But now it's Spring, so tonight the time goes forward again to what it ought to be anyway. So all the clocks have to change."

Who could possibly change all the clocks in the world? Did they change themselves?

Aunt Jean took another swallow of red wine. "People change their own clocks, Tony."

He brandished the watch she had given him.

"You have to change it yourself." She giggled. "Two o'clock in the morning: that's when the time changes."

When everybody was asleep in bed? People must get up specially. But his Aladdin watch didn't have a 'larm — like those watches which would go *beep-beep*.

"It doesn't have a 'larm!" he protested.

Aunt Jean seemed annoyed. "Well, I'm sure I'm very sorry about *that*!"

Back home, the man on the TV said how everyone should put their clocks forward at two in the morning; so this must be really important.

You had to put your own forward. Had to do it yourself. Tony was Big Five now. He asked Daddy to promise to wake him up at two, cos there was no 'larm on his watch. "You oughtn't to have said that to Aunt Jean," Mummy told him quite sternly. "As though you weren't satisfied! You hurt her feelings."

Daddy made a never-mind face at Mummy. "It's his birthday, after all — "

"Huh, at this rate he won't have another — "

"Let's forget it, hmm? Tiring day. I'll wake him up at two." And Daddy had winked at Mummy.

"What happens," asked Tony, "if you don't put the clock forward?"  
"In that case," Mummy said sharply, "you get left behind."

**H**e'd been left behind. Cos they thought he'd been rude to Aunt Jean; but he hadn't been!

A little girl was standing in the garden by the big rose bush, out of sight of the street. She was waving to him. She must have been left behind too!

The big window was kept locked for safety when the house was empty and at night, but Mummy had showed him how to unlock it in case there was ever a fire. As he pushed the window open the girl came closer. She was skinny, with untidy short brown hair. Her dress was printed with gray flowers which might have been any color during the day. That dress looked a bit torn and dirtied. Her thin ankles poked into trainers fastened tightly by those cling-together straps.

"The clocks have changed," Tony told her, and showed his Aladdin watch. "I've been left behind!"

For a moment he thought she was going to laugh at him, but then she replied firmly, "You aren't the only one."

"Daddy promised to wake me but he left me sleeping when he changed the clock."

"You won't be able to wake your Daddy now," she said with absolute certainty. "You can't wake a Daddy or a Mummy or anyone. They're all in a different hour. They're in their own world." She seemed to know all about this. Of course she must, if she was here and able to talk to him. What had *she* done that was wrong?

"They wouldn't be able to see you!" she hissed.

Tim had told Tony about a movie. Tim's baby-sitter and her boyfriend had wanted to watch the movie, and Tim was supposed to be in bed upstairs. Tim's home was bigger than Tony's; it had two floors. Tim had crept downstairs. The door to the sitting room was ajar. He had watched through the gap.

Once upon a time in a big old house a little girl had died horribly. A man and woman moved in, who didn't know about the girl. They already had two young sons but they wanted a girl as well. Soon somebody whom no one could see was using the toilet. Somebody was taking snacks and

milk from the fridge. Somebody was knocking things over and breaking them. At first the parents thought their own boys were to blame — but then an awful accident happened to one of the boys, which couldn't possibly have been his fault. The grown-ups called for a priest to come and throw water around the rooms and pray and *exercise* the house...

That's how it would be here at home. Tony would use the toilet and he'd get hungry and thirsty, but Mummy and Daddy would never see him because he was an hour behind.

"What can I do?" he asked the girl.

"Do what I say," she said. "I know what to do. We have to go somewhere special." She pointed up at the full moon. "That's a face up there."

"It's the Man in the Moon."

She stamped her foot angrily. "No, it isn't. It's a face all right, but it's the face of a *clock*. Only, you can't see the hands till you go to a special place. You have to see the hands move on the Moon. Then you can come back home, and it'll be all right."

Tony gazed at the bright blotchy Moon. It was as round as a clock tonight, a luminous clock.

"What if I just wind my watch forward *now*?"

"Too late," she sang out, "too late! You'll only break it!"

How did she know about the Moon?

"People have been to the Moon," she said.

"I know that!"

"That was to see about fitting new hands on it. The old hands are invisible 'cept to people who get left behind — and from special places. The spacemen stuck a spike in the Moon for the new hands. Soon it'll be a clock everyone can see, 'cept if it's cloudy."

"You can't see all of it all the time —"

"They'll light it properly. You're *wasting* time! I won't show you the place if you don't come now."

Tony pulled on his clothes and shoes and he climbed onto the hard windowframe, which hurt his knees, and dropped himself down on to the path.

The girl was taller than Tony by a head or more. Maybe she was seven. Or eight.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"People call me Mar-gar-et." She spoke each sound as if they were strange to her. "But I'm not a Mar-gar-et. I'm Midge."

A small garden hugged the bungalow. At the back of the garden was a fence. One of the planks had rotted and shifted aside. The girl already seemed to know about that. A grown-up couldn't get through the fence, but Tony could, even if it meant scraping clothes; and Midge was so skinny.

Behind the fence was a waste place — and beyond was a forest of Christmas trees in rows, with lanes which went on and on.

As Midge went with Tony into the forest, she asked, "What's your name, anyway?"

"It's Tony — I thought you knew about me!"

She caught hold of his hand, the one with the watch. Her own hand was sticky and strong.

"I know all about you! You had a birthday party. Balloons and Mummies and Daddies."

She must have peeped through the window of the community hall. She must have seen him walk back home with his parents, carrying his presents. He tried to pull away, but she tugged him along with her into the forest. "You have to come with me and see the hands of the Moon!"

Because of the Moon it was bright enough to see all the silvery branches.

"I want to go home," he begged.

"You can't go back yet. You'd still be too early. An hour too early."

"I'd have asked you to the party if I'd known you, Midge!"

She laughed.

And he began to cry.

With her free hand she slapped him on the cheek.

"Cry-baby," she mocked. "It's horrid being lost, Tony. Never being seen. Never being heard. 'Cept by my friends who can see the hands of the Moon."

Did she really want him as her friend?

"Where's the place?" he sniveled.

"It's at the far end of the forest."

He'd be safe until then, wouldn't he? She wouldn't slap him again? He let her lead him along, though really he couldn't have stopped her from dragging him.

After a while she said, "You'll have your time back — but I shan't. Not till the Moon grins wide and spits me out like it grinned and swallowed me once, and my friends."

"You said the Moon wasn't a man with a face, you said it was a clock!"

"Mainly it's a clock. Mainly!"

Tony was terrified. Who were these friends who were waiting at the far end of the forest?

**T**HE PAIR OF THEM CAME to a clearing. All around it, the boughs of the Christmas trees jutted like hundreds of barbed spears. The Moon glared down. Tony should easily have been able to see other children waiting, but he couldn't. Midge's friends must be hiding behind tree trunks. She sat down on soft nice-smelling needles, pulling him with her. Then she shuffled round behind him.

"Look up, look up," she chanted. "Gape at the Moon. Keep your eyes open. Don't close them. Don't look anywhere else or I'll have to hit you."

Tony stared up. His ears were alert for any rustle of feet creeping closer, but the pine needles would deaden the noise. The Moon began to blind him to anything else. Soon there was just that bright blotchy flat disc.

"It's horrid being lost, Tony — "

Desperately he tried to see hands on the Moon. Gaze as he might, he couldn't.

Gradually, out of the corners of his eyes, he became sure that other children were indeed sitting around in the clearing, clasping their drawn-up knees and staring at him. He didn't dare look to make sure.

"The Moon's made of stone," came Midge's voice, "and so am I. Hard stone." Did she have a stone in her hand? Was she was going to hit him with it the moment he stopped gaping? "A stone clock. A moon-dial..."

His eyes were watering with effort. Of course he blinked now and then.

"Please, Midge," he begged, but no reply came.

Gray light began to dawn. A hundred birds started singing. The Moon was fainter now, a sickly yellow. When it sank slowly behind the top branches of a Christmas tree at last he saw the dark pointers upon the Moon's face — and he cried out, "Yes, yes, I can see them!"

Midge wasn't there anymore. She'd gone. He hadn't heard her leave because of the birds. Nor were there any other children in the clearing. He was alone.

His legs had cramped. He staggered but soon he was running.

Only when he had climbed back into his bedroom, and the Donald Duck clock caught his eye, did he think to look at his wristwatch. Little hand near five. Big hand at nine. It was quarter to five — by the clock and by the Aladdin watch as well.

Mummy came in to wake him, but he was already awake. He'd been fretting whether she would come, or whether he'd have to go to the kitchen on his own — and would they be surprised to see him? Had they been trying to lose him? "I'm sorry!" he told her.

Mummy looked suspicious. "What about?"

"Cos I was rude to Aunt Jean."

"Oh...I thought you'd broken something."

He pointed at the clock. "Daddy didn't wake me at two."

"You were dead to the world, but your Daddy thought you'd want to see the right time in the morning — "

Oh yes. To see the right time was everything.

She realized what he had said. "At two? Did you think we'd sit up till two?"

With the summer term Tony started real school. The school bus took him there and brought him back. Different Mummies would ride on the bus in case bigger children behaved badly. Always two Mummies, so that they could talk to each other.

One hot day, men were busy tearing up the road near the huge house with the wall all around. A red light halted the bus, and Tony saw Midge on the pavement. She was standing stiffly beside a big woman who wore

a blue suit. Those flowers on Midge's dress were pink roses. Tony rapped his knuckles on the glass, then he slapped his flat palm, which made more noise.

The woman in blue had noticed Tony and was frowning. Midge only stared empty in the same direction as ever. He slapped harder.

"Stop that," he heard a Mummy call out. "Stop it right now! *Don't make fun.*"

The other Mummy said to her friend, "That's the girl that runs away. Though she's supposed to be *severely*," and she said a big word.

Back home, Tony asked his Mummy, "What's or-tis-tic mean?"

"Artistic," she corrected him. "It means you're good at painting and playing music and things like that. Did a teacher say that about you today?"

Tony shook his head. He mustn't have heard right in the bus. Anyway, Midge hadn't said anything to him about paint or music. He remembered how blank her look had been, as if her face was a stone. ♣

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# A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

## BRIGHT FUTURE: FIXING THE GREENHOUSE

**L**AST TIME I treated the deep intricacies of our biosphere, which may very well be more complex than the vaunted human brain.

Our Earth's enigmatic, complicated facets profoundly affect the global warming problem. No issue holds more profound possible consequences for the next century.

Yet there may be ways to attack the greenhouse effect catastrophe—which many fear looms on the horizon of the next century—without paying enormous, tragic costs.

I ended last time with an innocuous solution: plant forests to sop up the excess carbon dioxide put into the air by burning fossil fuels. Ecologists stop there; anything more imaginative seems to many to be unwarranted interference in the natural cycles that support all life.

But should this be so? I argued before that people will want solutions that let them keep, or even improve, their lot in life. Can some technological fixes bring this about? Let's get a bit science fictional...

### THE GERITOL SOLUTION

After the forests, the oceans comprise the other great sink of greenhouse gases. Some estimates say they absorb 40 percent of the fossil fuel emissions. In coastal waters rich in runoff, plankton can swarm densely, a hundred thousand in a drop of water.

Plankton color the sea brown and green where deltas form from big rivers, or where cities dump their sewage. Tiny yet hugely important, plankton govern how well the sea harvests the sun's bounty, and so are the foundation of the ocean's food chain. Far offshore,

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the sea returns to its plankton-starved blue.

The oceans are huge drivers in the environmental equations, because within them the plankton process vast stores of gases. In ice ages, CO<sub>2</sub> levels dropped 30 percent.

Could we do this today? Driving CO<sub>2</sub> down should lower temperatures, certainly. But how?

The answer may lie not in the warm tropics, but in the polar oceans. There, huge reserves of key ingredients for plant growth, nitrates and phosphates, drift unused. The problem is not weak light or bitter cold, but lack of iron. Electrons move readily in its presence, playing a leading role in trapping sunlight.

A radical fix, then, would be to seed these oceans with dissolved iron dust. This may have been the trigger that caused the big CO<sub>2</sub> drop in the ice ages: the continents dried, so more dust blew into the oceans, carrying iron and stimulating the plankton to absorb CO<sub>2</sub>. Mother Nature can be subtle.

Still, such an idea crosses the momentous boundary between natural mitigation and artificial means. Here is the nub of it, the conceptual chasm. With a boast that may cost his cause dearly, the in-

ventor of the idea, Dr. John Martin at the Moss Landing Marine Laboratories in California, said, "Give me half a tanker full of iron and I'll give you another ice age."

The captured carbon gets tied up in a "standing crop" of plankton; basically, this is ocean forestation. The CO<sub>2</sub> slowly dissolves into the lower waters, perhaps eventually depositing on the seabed. If we decide to stop the process, the standing crop will die off within a week, providing a quick correction.

First proposed in 1988, this "Geritol solution" has had a rocky history. Many derided it automatically as foolish, arrogant, and politically risky. But in 1996 the idea finally got tested, and performed well.

Near the Galapagos Islands lies a fairly biologically barren area. Over 28 square miles of blue sea scientists poured in 990 pounds of iron throughout a week of testing. Immediately the waters bloomed with tiny phytoplankton, finally covering 200 square miles, suddenly green. Plankton production peaked nine days after the experiment started.

A thousand pounds of iron dust stimulated more than 2000 times its own weight in plant growth, incredibly higher than any fertilizer

ever makes on land. The plankton soaked up CO<sub>2</sub>, reducing its concentration in nearby sea water by 15 percent. This deficiency it quickly made up by drawing carbon dioxide from the air.

But there is some evidence that little of the newly fixed carbon actually sank. It seems to have come back into chemical equilibrium with the air. Controversy surrounds this essential point; clearly, here is where more research could tell us much.

Projections show that since this process would affect only about 16 percent of the ocean area, a full-bore campaign to dump megatons of iron into the polar oceans probably would suck somewhere between 6 and 21 percent of the CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere, with most recent estimates fixing around 10 percent. This would dent the greenhouse problem, but not solve it entirely.

Even such partial solutions attract firm opponents. Geoengineering carries the strong scent of hubris.

Ecovirtue reared its head immediately after the 1988 proposals, well before any experiments. Many scientists and ecologists saw in it an incentive for polluters, on the Puritan model that any deviation

from abstinence is itself a further indulgence.

Some retaliated; Russell Seitz of Harvard said the experimenters were downplaying their results out of fear of seeming politically incorrect. "If this approach proves to be environmentally benign," Seitz said, "it would appear to be highly economic relative to a Luddite program of declaring war against fire globally."

Of course there are big uncertainties. How would the iron affect the deeper ecosystems, of which we know little? Will the carbon truly end up on the seabed? Can the polar oceans carry the absorbed carbon away fast enough to not block the process? Would the added plankton stimulate fish and whale numbers in the great Antarctic ocean? Or would some side effect damage the entire food pyramid?

Costs are better known; there is nothing very high-tech about dumping iron. Martin estimated that the job would take about half a million tons per year. Depending on what sort of iron proves best at prodding plankton, the iron costs range between ten million to a billion dollars.

Total operations costs — fifteen ships steaming across the polar oceans all year long, dumping

iron dust in lanes — bring the total to around ten billion dollars. This would soak up about a third of our global fossil-fuel generated CO<sub>2</sub> emission each year.

There will be side effects to growing so much sea algae, which are fed on by other plankton. Probably this feed cycle will produce tiny aerosols which in turn stimulate cloud condensation. Over the long lanes left by the steaming iron-spreaders, cottony clouds will form.

Is this bad? After all, clouds reflect sunlight, lessening the overall heating problem. This points to the other grand greenhouse strategy — altering the reflection of the planet itself.

#### REFLECTING ON REFLECTIVITY

What could be more intuitively appealing than simply reflecting more sunlight back into space, before it can be emitted in heat radiation and then absorbed by CO<sub>2</sub>?

People can understand this notion readily enough; black T-shirts are warmer in summer than white ones. We already know that simply by painting buildings white they stay cooler. We could compensate for the effect of all greenhouse gas emission since the Industrial Revo-

lution by reflecting less than one percent more of the sunlight.

Astronomers call a planet's net reflectivity the albedo, and a mere half of one percent decrease in Earth's would solve the greenhouse problem completely. The big problem is the oceans, which comprise about 70 percent of our surface area and absorb more because they are darker than land.

The most environmentally benign proposal for doing this is very high-tech: an orbiting white screen, about two thousand kilometers on a side. Even broken up into small pieces, putting such parasols up would cost about \$120 billion, a bit steep.

As well, we would have to pay considerably to take them down if they caused some undesirable side effect. In fact, one is certain — a night sky permanently light-polluted, making astronomers and moon-struck lovers irritable.

Using more innocuous dust to reflect sunlight does not work; it drifts away, driven off by the sun's light pressure.

Attention first turned to reflectors at high altitudes because much sunlight gets absorbed in the atmosphere on its way to us. Spreading dust in the stratosphere appears workable because at those heights

tiny particles stay aloft for several years. This is why volcanoes spewing dust affect weather strongly.

Even better than dust are microscopic droplets of sulfuric acid, which reflect light well. Sulfate aerosols can also raise the number of droplets that make clouds condense, further increasing overall reflectivity. This could then be a local cooling, easier to monitor than CO<sub>2</sub>'s global warming. Such small, controllable experiments we could perform now.

The amount of droplets or dust needed is a hundred times smaller than the amount already blown into the atmosphere by natural processes, so we would not be venturing big dislocations. And we would get some spectacular sunsets in the bargain.

The cheapest way of delivering dust to the stratosphere is to shoot it up, not fly it. Big naval guns fired straight up can put a one-ton shell twenty kilometers high, where it would explode and spread the dust. This costs only a hundredth of the space parasol idea. Rockets, balloons, and aircraft all perform worse.

But why stick to dust when we already add a perfectly good reflecting area to the upper atmosphere as part of everyday flying — aircraft exhausts? Sweetening the fuel mix-

ture in a jet engine to burn rich can leave a ribbon of fog behind for up to three months, though as it spreads it becomes invisible to the eye.

Since fuel costs form about 15 percent of airlines' cash operating expenses, for seven million dollars this method would offset the 1990 U.S. greenhouse emissions, quite a cheap choice.

Even hiring air freight companies to carry dust and dump it high up would cost only ten times more, so the approaches are economically interchangeable. Perhaps an added asset is that quietly running rich on airline fuel will attract little notice and is hard to muster a media-saturated demonstration against.

But there are, as always, side effects. Dust or sulfuric acid would heat the stratosphere, too, with unknown impact. Some suspect that the ozone layer could be affected. If a widespread experiment shows this, we could turn off the effect within roughly a year as the dust settles down and gets rained out.

Stranger ideas have been advanced. For example, making a very high altitude screen of many aluminized, hydrogen-filled balloons far above air traffic could work, and self-distribute itself over the entire globe.

But the balloon parasols would cost twenty times the jet-plume approach. Ruptured balloons falling in the back garden could irritate all humanity. Imagine late-night comedians using them as props...

These ideas envision doing what natural clouds do already, as the major players in the total albedo picture. A 4 percent increase in stratocumulus over the oceans would offset global CO<sub>2</sub> emission. Land reflects sunlight much better than the wine-dark seas, so putting clouds far out from land, and preferably in the tropics, gets the greatest leverage.

Still, the most recent research shows that global averages are misleading, because climate dynamics depends on how spatially patchy reflectivity is. Even as we plan, we must keep in mind our ignorance of the complexities.

Making clouds is an old but still controversial craft. Clouds condense around microscopic nuclei, often the kind of sulfuric acid droplets the geoengineers want to spread in the stratosphere.

The oceans make such droplets as sea algae decays, and the natural production rate sets the limit on how many clouds form over the seas. Clouds cover about

31 percent of our globe already, so a 4 percent increase is not going to noticeably ruin anybody's day.

Tinkering with such a mammoth natural process seems daunting, but in fact about four hundred medium-sized coal-fired power plants give off enough sulfur in a year to do the job for the whole Earth. (This in itself suggests just how much we are already perturbing the planet.)

The trouble is that coal plants sit on land and the clouds must be at sea. A savvy international strategy leaps to mind: Subsidize electricity-dependent industry on isolated Pacific islands and ship them the messiest sulfur-rich coal. Their plumes would stretch far downwind and the manufactured goods could revitalize the tropical ocean states, paying them for being global good neighbors.

A more boring approach, worked out by the National Academy Panel, envisions a fleet of coal-burning ships which heap sulfur directly into the furnaces. They spew great ribbons of sulfur vapor far out at sea, where nobody can complain, and cloud corridors obediently form behind.

Best would be to use these sulfur clouds to augment at the edges of existing overcast regions, swell-

ing them and increasing the lifetime of the natural clouds. The continuously burning sulfur freighters would follow weather patterns, guided by weather satellite data.

At first these should operate as regional experiments, to work out a good model of how the ocean-cloud system responds. Moving from science to true geoengineering could take a decade or two. This low-tech method would cost about two billion dollars per year, including amortizing the ships.

The biggest political risk here lies with shifts in the weather. The entire campaign would increase the sulfur droplet content in our air by about a quarter. Probably this would cause no significant trouble, with most of the sulfur raining out into the oceans, which have enormous buffering capacity.

Keeping the freighters a week's sailing distance from land would probably save us from scare headlines about sudden acid rains on farmer's heads, since about 30 percent of the sulfur should rain out each day.

Maybe some collaboration would work here. Freighters burning sulfur could also spread iron dust, combining the approaches, with some economies. Further scrutiny will probably turn up further

savings; these calculations are back-of-the-envelope sketches.

Also, the freighters would operate far from people's everyday lives, avoiding Not In My Back Yard movements. This is definitely not so for, say, firing dust into the stratosphere, with the booming of naval guns.

#### ALBEDO CHIC

The National Academy of Sciences panel that studied mitigation measures found that "...one of the surprises of this analysis is the relatively low cost" of implementing some significant geoengineering. It might take only a few billion dollars to mitigate the U.S. emission of CO<sub>2</sub>. Compared with stopping people in China from burning coal, this is nothing.

We should not hold the 1992 Panel report, thick with footnotes and layers of qualifiers, to be a road map to a blissful future. Their estimates are simple, linear, and made with poorly known parameters. They also ignore many secondary effects.

For example, forests promote clouds above them, since the water vapor they exhale condenses quickly. Growing trees to sop up CO<sub>2</sub> then also increases albedo, a

positive feedback bonus. Is this the end of the chain? Unlikely.

Perhaps the greatest unknown factor is social: how will the politically aware public (those who vote, anyway) react?

If they are painted early and often as Doctor Strangeloves of the air, the geoengineers will fail. Properly portrayed as allies of science, they could become heroes.

Here a crucial factor is whether the agenda looks like another top-down contrivance, orders from the elite. A Draconian policing of illegal fuel burning will indeed look this way, but mitigation need not. It will play out far from people's lives, out at sea or high in the air.

Better, perhaps widespread acceptance of mitigation strategies could lead to an albedo chic, with ostentatious flaunting of white roofs, cars, the return of the ice-cream suit in fashion circles. White could be appropriate again after Labor Day.

More seriously, simply adding sand or glass to ordinary asphalt ("glassphalt") doubles its albedo. This is one mitigation measure everyone could see — a clean, passive way to Do Something. Cooler roads lessen tire erosion, too. The urban heat island effect, which drives up air conditioning energy consumption in summer, would ease.

About one percent of the U.S. is covered by human constructions, mostly paving, suggesting that we may already control enough of the land to get at the job. Many small measures could add to a global change. Every little bit would indeed help.

This is crucial: mitigation wears the white hat. It asks simple, clear measures of everyone, before going to larger scale interventions. Grass-roots involvement should be integral from the very beginning.

This should go apace with efforts at the nation-state level, especially since mitigation intertwines deeply with diplomacy.

Here appearances are even more critical, given the levels of animosity between the profligate burners (especially the U.S.) and the tropical world.

Plausible solutions should stay within the Panel's sober guidelines. Learning more is the crucial first step, of course. This is not just the usual academic call for more funded research; nobody wants to try global experiments on a wing and a prayer.

Beyond more studies and reports, we must begin thinking of controlled experiments. Climate scientists have so far studied passively, much like astronomers.

They have a bias toward this mode, especially since the discernible changes we have made in our climate generally have been pernicious. Such mental sets ebb slowly. The reek of hubris also restrains many.

But a time for limited experiments like the iron-dumping one will come. This will be the second great step as we ponder whether to become geoengineers. Constraints must be severe to insure clear results.

Most important, perturbations in climate must be local and reversible — and not merely to quiet environmentalist fears. Only controlled experiments, well diagnosed, will be convincing to both sides in this debate.

Indeed, the green plume near the Galapagos Islands showed this. Its larger features were best studied by satellite, which picked up the green splotch strongly against the dark blue sea.

But the crucial issue of whether the carbon stayed tied up in ocean waters was poorly diagnosed. Satellites were of no help. Slightly better funding and more scientists in dispersed, small craft could have told us a lot more.

Third, careful climate modeling must closely parallel every ex-

periment. Few doubt that our climate stands in a class by itself in terms of complexity. Absent a remotely useful theory of complexity in systems, we must proceed cautiously.

While computer studies are notorious for revealing mostly what was sought, confirming the prejudices of their programmers, methods are improving quickly. They can explore the many side avenues of weakly perturbing geoengineering experiments. Invoking computer models as crucial watchdogs in every experiment will calm fears, at least among the elite who read beyond the headlines.

Still, going from the local to the global is fraught with uncertainty and certain to inspire much anxiety. We will always be uncertain stewards of the Earth.

And probably the greenhouse shall not be our last problem, either. We are doing many things to our environment, with our numbers expected to reach ten billion by 2050. What new threats will emerge?

Fresh disasters shall probably spring from the many synergistic effects that we must trace through the geophysical labyrinth. Once we become caretakers, we cannot stop. The large tasks confronting human-

ity, especially the uplifting of the majority to some semblance of prosperity, must be carried forward in the shadow of our stewardship.

#### PURITANS AND PROPHETS

Americans have a deep propensity for pursuing morality into the thickets of science. The cloning of a sheep in Scotland provokes stern finger-pointing by archbishops and ethicists alike. This we must expect as scientific topics become ever more complicated, and freighted with profound implications.

So it inevitably shall be for greenhouse gases. Of course it would be far better to abstain from burning so much. The fossil carbon resources are a vast heritage whose utility, convenience, and endless applications we — or rather, surely our great-grandchildren — shall not see again.

But the experience of the last several decades holds no grounds for even a sliver of optimism. Modern prosperity is built upon cheap, handy energy. Billions of new people added to the carrying capacity of the planet — which some globalists believe we have already exceeded — will only exacerbate our habit of digging wealth from the ground, the burnable corpses of early life.

In the end, the deep Puritan impulse to scold and condemn will fall upon deaf ears in both the emerging and the advancing nations. It has not fared well among its natural constituency, those who are far more easily moved by campaigns to end smoking, save the whales, or stop sullyng the city air.

But among the able nations, those who have the foresight to grasp solutions, an odd reluctance pervades the policy classes. Ralph Cicerone, a noted atmospheric physicist, noted that "Many who envision environmental problems foresee doom and have little faith in technology, and therefore propose strong limits on industrialization, while most optimists refuse to believe that there is an environmental problem at all."

Having sinned against Mother Nature inadvertently, many are keenly reluctant to intervene knowingly. Sherwood Rowland of the University of California at Irvine, who predicted with Mario Molina the depletion of the ozone layer, declared "I am unalterably opposed to global mitigation." This added considerable weight to the abstention cause.

At root, we see ourselves as the problem; only by behaving humbly, living lightly upon our Earth, can

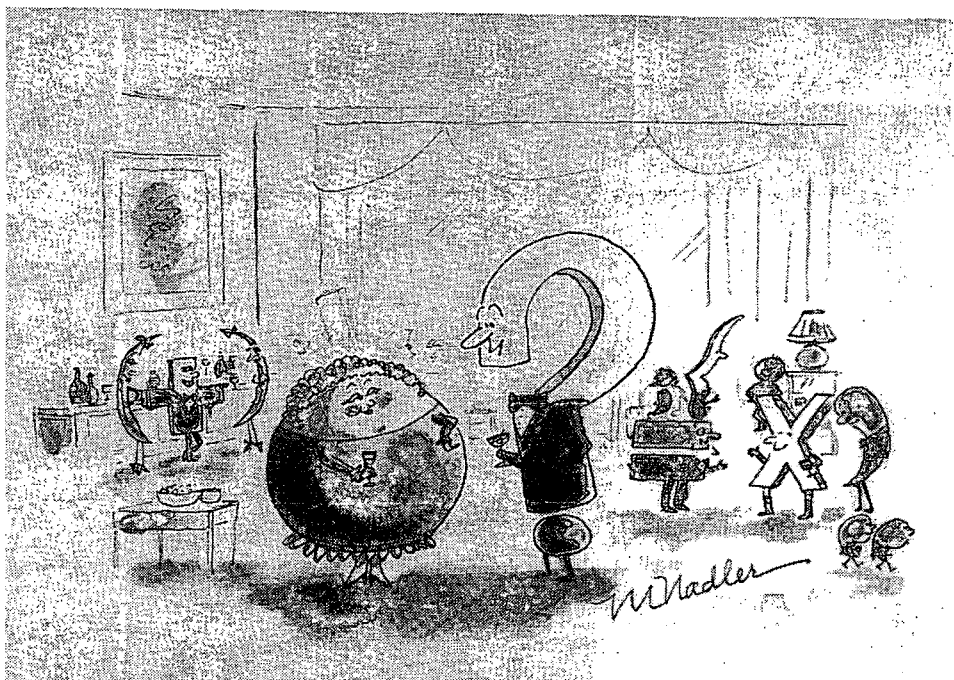
we atone. Here most scientists and theologians agree, at least for now.

The next century shall see a protracted battle between the prophets who would intervene and the moralists who see all grand scale human measures as tainted. Even now many advance their argument that to even speak of geoengineering encourages the unwashed to even more excess, since the masses will

think that once again science has a remedy at hand.

Some, though, will say quietly, persistently, Well, maybe science does...

Comments (and objections!) to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717, or [gbenford@uci.edu](mailto:gbenford@uci.edu). ☞



*"Not the Dot Com!"*

*Those readers who have already discovered the work of James P. Blaylock (his many novels include The Paper Grail, Homunculus, The Digging Leviathan, and most recently Winter Tides) know that his fantasies show a keen appreciation of life's oddities and eccentricities. The following novelet, which was published in a limited edition by A.S.A.P. a few months ago, marks Mr. Blaylock's first appearance in these pages. It's a pleasure to introduce you to Doyle Jimmerson and the unusual truths that await him in the old curiosity shop.*

# The Old Curiosity Shop

*By James P. Blaylock*

THE TRIP DOWN FROM Seattle in the rattling old Mercury wagon took most of two days. Jimmerson tried to sleep for a few hours somewhere south of Mendocino along Highway 1, the Mercury parked on a turnout and Jimmerson wedged in between the spare tire, his old luggage, and some cardboard boxes full of what amounted to his possessions. None of it was worth any real money. It was just trinkets, souvenirs of his forty years married to Edna: some salt and pepper shakers from what had been their collection, dusty agates and geodes from a couple of trips to the desert back in '56, old postcards and photographs, a pair of clipper ship bookends they'd bought down in New Orleans at the Jean Lafitte Hotel, and a few books, including the Popular Science Library set that Edna had given him for Christmas a hell of a long time ago. Most of the rest of what he owned he had left in Seattle, and every mile of highway that spun away behind him made it less and less likely that he would ever return for it.

News of Edna's death had reached him yesterday in the form of a letter

from the county, identifying Doyle Jimmerson as "responsible for the costs incurred by Edna Jimmerson's burial." And of course he *was* responsible — for more than just the costs. They were married, even if he hadn't seen her for nearly a year, and she had no other kin. He would have thought that Mrs. Crandle, the next door neighbor, would have sent him the news of Edna's death sooner, but Mrs. Crandle was a terrible old shrew, and probably she hated him for how he had left, how he had stayed away....

He had never felt more married to Edna than now that she was dead. His long-cherished anger and all his tired principles had fallen to dust on the instant of his reading the letter, and as he lay listening to the slow dripping of the branches and the shifting of the dark ocean beyond the car windows, he knew that he had simply been wrong — about Edna's fling with the Frenchman, Mr. des Laumes, about his own self-righteous staying-away, about his looking down on Edna from the self-satisfied height of a second-story hotel room along the waterfront in Seattle where he had lived alone these past twelve months.

There was a fog in off the ocean, and as he lay in the back of the Mercury he could hear waves sighing in the distance. The eucalyptus trees along the roadside were ghostly dark through the mists, the ocean an invisible presence below. There was the smell of dust and cardboard and old leather on the air, and water dripped onto the roof of the car from overhanging branches. Now and then a truck passed, gunning south toward San Francisco, and the Mercury swayed on its springs and the fog whirled and eddied around the misty windows.

Before dawn he was on the road again, driving south along the nearly deserted highway. Fog gave way to rain, and the rugged Pacific coast was black and emerald under a sky the color of weathered iron. It was late afternoon when he pulled into the driveway and cut the engine, which died for another twenty seconds before coughing itself silent. He sat there in the quiet car, utterly unsure of himself — unsure even why he had come. He could *far* easier have sent a check. And he was helpless now, worthless, no good to poor Edna, who was already dead and buried....

Of course Mrs. Crandle hadn't sent him a letter. He wasn't worth a letter. He wondered if the old woman was watching him through the

window right now, and he bent over and looked at the front of her house. There she was, a shadow behind the drapery, peering out at him. He could picture her face, pruned up like one of those dolls they make out of dried fruit. He waved at her, and then, before he got out of the car, he opened the glove compartment and looked for a moment at the blue steel .38 that lay atop the road maps and insurance papers and old registrations. The gun appeared to him to be monumentally heavy, like a black hole in the heart of the old Mercury.

He shut the glove compartment door, climbed stiffly out of the car, and took a look at the house and yard. The dichondra lawn was up in dandelions and devil grass, and the hibiscus were badly overgrown, dropping orange blossoms onto the grass and walkway. The house needed paint. He had been meaning to paint it when he'd left, but he hadn't. Things had happened too fast that morning. Let the Frenchy paint it, he had told Edna before he had walked out.

He headed up along the side of the house, where a litter of throwaway newspapers and front-porch advertisements lay sodden with rain, hidden in front of Edna's Dodge. Someone, probably Mrs. Crandle, had been tossing them there. The right front tire of the Dodge was flat, and it looked like it had been for a long time. Instantly it occurred to him that Edna must have been sick for some time, that she hadn't been able to get around, but he pushed it out of his mind and continued toward the back door, only then spotting the box springs and mattress tilted against the fence by the garage. Someone had covered it with a plastic dropcloth to save it from the weather, but the sight of it there behind the cloudy plastic was disorienting, and he felt as if he had been away forever.

The house was closed up now, the curtains drawn, and he had to jiggle his key in the lock to turn the bolt. The door creaked open slowly, and he stepped in onto the linoleum floor after wiping his feet carefully on the mat. At once he felt the emptiness of the house, as if it were hollow, reverberating with his footsteps. He walked as silently as he could through the service porch and into the kitchen, where the tile counter was empty of anything but a glass tumbler still partly full of water. He reached for it in order to pour it into the sink, but then let it alone and went out into the dining room, straightening a chair that was out of place at the table. The old oriental carpet was nearly threadbare outside the bedroom

door (Edna had always wanted him to step past it, so as not to wear it out before its time) and seeing it now, that footworn patch of rug, he felt the sorrow in the house like a weight.

He listened at the bedroom door and allowed himself to imagine that even now she sat inside, reading in the chair by the window, that he could push the door open and simply tell her he was sorry, straighten things out once and for all. If only he had a chance to *explain* himself! He reached for the doorknob, hesitated, dizzy for a moment with the uncanny certainty that all the emptiness in the house was drifting out from within that single room, wafting under the door, settling on the furniture, on the carpets, on the lampshades and books like soot in a train yard.

Setting his teeth, he turned the knob and pushed open the door, peering carefully inside. Very nearly everything was as he remembered: the chairs by the window, the long bookcase on the wall, their bird's-eye maple chests, the cedar trunk at the foot of the bed. He walked in, crossing the floor to the bedside table. On top of it lay a glass paperweight, a silver spoon, and a faded postcard with a picture of a boardwalk on it — Atlantic City? Jimmerson almost recognized it. He had been there before; he and Edna had. He picked up the paperweight and looked into its translucent glass, clouded by milky swirls. He could almost see a face in the swirls, but when it occurred to him that it was Edna's face, he set it down again and turned to the bottom shelf of the table. A liqueur glass sat there. There was a greenish residue in the bottom, an oily smear, which smelled vaguely of camphor and juniper and weeds. He set the glass down and forced himself to look at the bed.

It was a single bed now, and although it wasn't a hospital bed, there were cloth and Velcro restraints affixed to the frame — wrist and ankle restraints both.

**H**E RANG Mrs. Crandle's doorbell, then stood back a couple of steps so as not to push her. She opened the door wide — no peering through the crack — and the look on her face held loathing and indifference both. "So you've come back," she said flatly. Her white hair hung over her forehead in a wisp, and her house smelled of cabbage and ironing.

"I've come back."

"Now that Edna's dead you've come back to take her things." She nodded when she said this, as if it stood to reason.

"Our things, Mrs. Crandle," he said unwisely.

"You have *no* claim," she said, cutting him off. "You walked out on that poor woman and left her to that...parlor rat. You might as well have killed her yourself. You *did* kill her. As sure as you're standing here now, Doyle Jimmerson, you took the breath of life right out of that poor woman." She stared at him, and for a moment he thought she was going to slam the door in his face.

"I didn't kill her, Mrs. Crandle. After forty years of marriage she chose another man, and I...."

"She chose nothing," Mrs. Crandle said. "She met a man who was a conversationalist, unlike some men I could name, a man of culture and breeding, and you flew off the handle. What did she want for herself but some of the finer things in life? — a nice dinner now and then at the French Café instead of once a month at the Steer Inn. You're beer and skittles, Doyle Jimmerson, but a little bit of Edna wanted a glass of champagne. That's all she wanted, Mr. Jimmerson, if you're capable of taking my meaning. And when she stood up for herself, you walked out, as if she was having some kind of affair."

"A conversationalist? *That's* what he was? I can think of a couple of other terms that aren't half as polite. Even you called him a parlor rat. Him and his stinking chin whiskers, his damned champagne. I couldn't stand it. I told her what I'd do before I'd stand it." But even when he said it he knew it was false. Anyone can stand anger. He could simply have thrown his anger out with the bath water. Loneliness and betrayal were another matter, not so easy to throw out. What had Edna suffered? The question silenced him.

"Yes, I did call him a rat," Mrs. Crandle said evenly. "And I'll just remind you that you abandoned your wife to that creature, even though you knew what he was. You couldn't take him, so you left Edna to take him. And *she* found out too late, didn't she? All of us did. Now she's dead and you've come down here to gloat. You won the war. To the victor go the spoils, eh?"

"I'm not the victor, Mrs. Crandle. I didn't win."

"No, you didn't, Mr. Jimmerson. You lost something more than you know."

He nodded his agreement. He couldn't argue with that. "What do you mean she found out 'too late'? Did the Frenchman have anything to do with...?"

"Nothing and everything, I guess you could say. No more nor less than you had."

"Help me out here, Mrs. Crandle. Edna...she wouldn't tell me much."

"Well I'll tell you a thing or two. You went inside that house just now, that house where you yourself should have been living this last long year. And so maybe you've seen the room where she died. I was with her there in the last couple of weeks. I stayed by her."

"I thank you for that."

She looked at him in silence for a moment, as if she were tired of him.

"You saw the bed?"

"I saw the bed, Mrs. Crandle. I saw the restraints."

"There was almost nothing left of her there at the end. That's all I can tell you. And I mean *nothing*. She was empty, Mr. Jimmerson, like something made out of sea foam. Any gust of wind might have blown her into the sky. At night, when the moon was overhead, she...she would start to drift away, poor thing."

"The moon..." he said, not quite comprehending. The word "lunacy" leaped into his mind. He pictured that lonely bed again, Mrs. Crandle sitting in Edna's seat by the window, knitting and knitting while Edna drifted away, strapped to the bed frame, their old double bed out in the driveway, going to bits in the weather. "She... When she called the last couple of times she sounded a little confused. Like she had lost track of things, you know. She even forgot who I was, who she had called. I guess I just didn't grasp that."

"That's a crying shame."

"Worse than that. I was pretty sure of myself, Mrs. Crandle — sure that I was in the right. What I mean is that I was so damned self-righteous that I put top spin on everything she said. Heaven help me I even twisted what she *didn't* say. She can tell me all about the Frenchman, was what I thought at the time, *but she doesn't know her own damned husband of forty years*. Hell," he said, and he rubbed his face tiredly, conscious now that rain was starting to fall again, pattering against the porch roof. "I guess I thought she was trying to get my goat."

"And so you got mad again. You hung up the phone."

"I did. I got mad. I was a damned fool, Mrs. Crandle, but there's not a thing that I can do about it now."

"Well you're right about that, anyway, if it's any consolation to you."

"Tell me about it, then. Was it Alzheimer's?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I'm not certain it was in the medical books at all. It was a wasting disease. That's all I can tell you. Sorrow did it. Sorrow and abandonment. Gravity weighed too heavily upon her, Mr. Jimmerson, and when it looked like it would crush her, she did what she had to do. *She made herself light*. That's the only truth you'll find down here. I can't tell you anything more than that." Mrs. Crandle swung the door nearly shut now, and he shoved his foot against the jamb to block it.

"Where is she, Mrs. Crandle? You can tell me that much."

"Over at Angel's Flight," she said through the nearly closed door. "They buried her last week. No service of course, except for the Father from up at the Holy Childhood. He said a few words alongside the grave, but it was just me and a couple of the others from the old bridge club. I suppose you can get over there tonight and make your peace if you want to. Or leastwise you can try to make your peace. I hope you can find the words." She shut the door firmly now, against his shoe, and then opened it long enough for him to jerk his foot out before slamming it shut again.

He hadn't gotten anything out of her except bitterness, which was as much as he deserved. He headed down the porch steps, realizing that he hadn't really wanted to know about the bed restraints. What he wanted to know was what had gone through her mind while he was sitting full of self-pity up in Seattle. What she had thought about *him*, about the long years that they were married, what her loneliness *felt* like. He had lost her for a year, and he wanted that year back, along with all the rest that he hadn't paid any attention to. No matter that it was bound to be a Pandora's box, full of sorrow and demons, and perhaps without Hope at the bottom, either.

Evening had fallen, with big clouds scudding across the sky in a wild race, the rain falling steadily now. He headed up Magnolia Street through the downpour. The street lamps were on, haloed by the misty rain, and the gutters already ran with water. Living rooms and front porches were

lighted, and he saw a man and a woman looking out through a big picture window at the front of one of the houses, watching the rain the way people sit and watch a fire in a fireplace. He thought of where he would sleep tonight and knew that it wouldn't be among the dusty ghosts in the house; the back of the Mercury would be good enough for him, parked in the driveway, despite what Mrs. Crandle would think and what it would do to his back.

Where Lemon dead-ended into Marigold, he turned up through the big wrought iron gates of the cemetery, and drove slowly toward the stone building nearly hidden in the shade of a cluster of vast trees. Vines climbed the walls of the three-story granite mausoleum, and light shone out from within a deep lamp-lit portico in the tower that served as an entry. There was a second high tower at the rear of the building, lit by lamps hidden on the mausoleum roof. This second tower was clearly a columbarium, the hundreds of wall niches set with tiny doors. A stone stairway spiraled upward around it, and rainwater washed down the stairs now as if it were a mountain cataract. Beyond the tower lay a hundred feet of lawn strewn with headstones, and beyond that a walnut grove stretched away into the darkness, the big white-trunked walnut trees mostly empty of leaves. Above the shadowy grove the moon shone past the edge of a cloud. Jimmerson angled the Mercury into a parking stall, cut the engine, and sat watching for another moment as an owl flew out of the grove and disappeared beneath the eaves of the tower. He got out of the car, slammed the door, and hunched through the rain, ducking in under the portico roof where he rang the bell.

He heard footsteps inside, and the arched door opened slowly to reveal a high-ceilinged room with stone floors and dark wood paneling. The man in the doorway was tall and thin, with a stretched, Lincolnesque face and a rumpled black suit. Jimmerson stepped into the room, which smelled of gardenias, and the man swung the door shut against the rain.

"It's a hellish night," he said, and he nodded at Jimmerson. "I'm George Gladstone."

"Doyle Jimmerson, Mr. Gladstone. I'm glad to meet you."

"I see. You must be Edna Jimmerson's...?"

"Husband." He felt like a fraud. "I was in Seattle when I heard. On business. I drove straight down."

"I'm certain you got here as quickly as you could, Mr. Jimmerson, and welcome to Angel's Flight." A long sideboard stood against the far wall of the room, and on top of the sideboard was a bowl of floating gardenia blossoms and an iron clock. The sound of the ticking clock filled the mausoleum. A gilt-framed painting hung above the sideboard depicting a man and a woman dressed in robes, ascending into heaven in defiance of gravity. An arched door stood open in the clouds, and the Earth lay far below. Here and there above it more people were ascending, tiny wingless angels rising into the sky against the blue of the ocean.

"Very nice picture," Jimmerson said. And he peered more closely at the door in the clouds, at the light that shone from beyond it. There was something in the spiral brush strokes that looked like eyes, hundreds of them, staring out from heaven at the world of the living.

"We like to think of ourselves as a celestial depot, Mr. Jimmerson."

"That's a comforting thought." He turned his back on the painting. I wonder if I could see...Edna's grave. My wife. I realize it's late, and the weather and all..."

"Yes, of course you can."

"You don't have to take any trouble. If you'll just show me the way..."

"No trouble at all, Mr. Jimmerson. Give me a moment and I'll see to the equipage." Jimmerson followed him into an adjacent room, where a display of coffins was laid out, the coffins set into niches along a stone wall, all of them tilted up at the head end to better show them off. Light shone down on them from candle-flame bulbs in iron chandeliers high above in the ceiling, but the light was dim and the room full of shadows cast by the coffins and by the complex framework of iron that supported them. Jimmerson looked them over, vaguely and shamefully wondering which sort Edna had been buried in — nothing expensive, probably.

They were apparently arranged in order of extravagance. A simple coffin-shaped pine box lay nearest the door, the two-piece lid nailed tight on the bottom and hinged open at the top to reveal a quilted satin lining within. There was a fancier box next to it — some sort of exotic veneer with chrome hardware, and next to that a white-lacquered box with gold handles and a round glass viewing window. Jimmerson stepped across to it and looked in through the porthole, then gasped and trod back when he

saw that there was someone inside — a man, pale and thin and with his coat collar too high on his neck.

He forced himself to take another look, and he saw this time that it was a display dummy, its hair very neatly combed and its cheeks rouged. A fly had gotten inside somehow and died, and it lay now on the white satin pillow alongside the dummy's head. It occurred to him that he ought to point the fly out to Gladstone, just for the sake of friendliness, but Gladstone had utterly disappeared, and the mausoleum was silent but for the ticking of the entryway clock. Jimmerson ran his hand over the polished ebony of the next casket, and then walked along past a half dozen more — gold-leafed, inlaid, and carved and with handles and hasps and doodads of silver and ivory. There was an Egyptian sarcophagus, the lid thrown back and supported by a heavy-linked chain. The raised image on the lid was of a pharaoh-looking robed man with a conical beard, his arms crossed, his head turned to the side. In his hands he held a richly painted ankh and a striped serpent, and within the casket, tilted against a brass easel, lay an explanatory placard suggesting that instead of a pharaoh, the image of your loved one might be fashioned on the lid, holding anything at all in his hands — a favorite tie, a fountain pen, a golf club. The casket was extra wide, the paneled sides fit with slots that contained a pair of decorative flasks and a cut crystal tumbler. There were other slots left empty, book-size cubbyholes and a sliding glass panel suitable for a framed photograph.

"All the comforts of home," Gladstone said, coming into the room. "Room at the foot end for a companion as well. Mr. Hemming, the car dealer from Santa Ana, was interred with his dog."

"They killed the dog?" Jimmerson asked, horrified.

"Oh heavens no. The dog died of grief. It's not at all uncommon. Dogs are particularly sensitive that way." He stared at Jimmerson for a moment, as if he intended the comment to make some sort of point, a not very obscure point, and then he said, "Perhaps you'd like to see a little something." Jimmerson followed him out of the room, back toward the rear of the mausoleum where their footsteps echoed down a long corridor lit with flickering wall sconces. There were heavy wooden doors in the stone walls on either side. Gladstone stopped at one of the doors, removed a skeleton key from his pocket, and unlocked the bolt, swinging it open

on its hinges to reveal a room containing half a dozen steel tables. A cord emerged from a slot at the bottom of one of the tables, and floating like a helium balloon some few feet from the ceiling, tethered by its foot to the cord, was what appeared to be a shroud-draped human corpse, its face and bare feet exposed to the dim light of the room.

Jimmerson at first took it for another dummy, and he glanced at the ceiling, expecting to see wires. There were none. He stared at it, uncomprehending, but then with a growing certainty that the thing's pale flesh and stringy hair was in fact the flesh and hair of a dead man. Gladstone stepped across and tugged on the cord, which wound down into the table. The corpse descended a couple of feet and then floated slowly upward again when he let go of the cord, its feet swinging around in a clockwise direction, then back again. "He'll come down on his own fairly soon," Gladstone said, seeing the look on Jimmerson's face. "These cases always do. It takes about twelve hours for the spirit to flee the body after death, and then the remains are earthbound once again. Often there's nothing left but a paper shell, easily inflatable if the family wants an open casket funeral."

"What...what on earth did he die of?"

"A broken heart, Mr. Jimmerson. I'll tell you that plainly. Medical science calls it 'voluntary dwindling' when they call it anything at all. Which they don't, for the most part. It's utterly beyond the grasp of medicine. These are matters of the spirit, by and large. And it's rare, I can assure you, that we get two such advanced cases in a single week." He stared at Jimmerson again, who suddenly remembered the restraints on Edna's deathbed. What had Mrs. Crandle said about Edna's "drifting away"? Had she been speaking literally...?

"Was Edna...?"

Gladstone nodded slowly, and Jimmerson leaned against the plaster wall to steady himself.

"She's out of harm's way now," Gladstone said, patting Jimmerson's arm. "Let's have a look at her grave, shall we?"

He led the way down the corridor again, Jimmerson stumbling along after him, until they came out into a sort of stone gardener's shed with a lean-to roof. Mud-caked spades and shovels stood tilted against the wall, and a steel backhoe scoop lay on the floor alongside the iron debris of a

dismantled engine, greasy pistons and bolts and hoses dumped haphazardly on the ground. Two yellow rain slickers hung from hooks by the door, and Gladstone stepped over the engine parts and took them down, handing one to Jimmerson. It had an attached hat with a wide brim, and the coat itself hung to Jimmerson's knees. Gladstone passed him a black umbrella, then opened the door and stepped out into the rain, which was falling more lightly now.

Jimmerson followed him along a narrow stone path, hoisting his umbrella against the mist and turning it into the wind, which gusted through the trees, sweeping down a litter of dead oak leaves that whirled away across the grounds. The night smelled of wet leaves and clay, and the moon shone between the clouds, the headstones casting long shadows on the grass. The path wound in a wide circle toward the walnut grove, past a lily-choked fish pond and a cluster of mossy concrete benches. Gladstone finally stopped at the edge of a small, gently sloping hill where a rectangle of new turf covered a tiny grave. They stood silently for a moment.

"It's awfully small," Jimmerson whispered at last.

Gladstone nodded. "It's not uncommon," he said, "that a dwindler can fit into a casket the size of shoe box, once the spirit has flown. And it's not without its advantages, I suppose, when all is said and done. Very conservative burial, spacially speaking."

"Will there be a headstone?" Jimmerson asked. "I guess it's up to me to order one."

"One should arrive from the stonecutters late next week, actually. It was paid for by a Mr. des Laumes, I believe the name was. French gentleman. You must have known him." Gladstone gave him a sidewise glance, then looked quickly away.

"Cancel the order," Jimmerson told him.

"It's too late for that," Mr. Jimmerson. "The work's underway. Very elaborate, too."

"I don't want elaborate. I want simple. This Frenchman's got no right to order a headstone. Who gave him permission to shove his oar in?"

"Permission, Mr. Jimmerson? In the absence of any other offering..." He shrugged helplessly. "Of course, now that you've returned..."

"That's right. Now that I've come home Mr. des Laumes's headstone

can go to hell. If the work's already started, then I'll pay for it. Mr. des Laumes can have it back with interest, too — on top of his head."

"As you wish, sir," Gladstone said. "It only has to snow once before I get the drift." He nodded and winked, shook Jimmerson's hand, and then moved off down the path again, heading back toward the mausoleum. Jimmerson stayed by the graveside, forcing himself to simmer down. By God, he wouldn't let this Frenchman give him another moment of grief, not one more moment — especially not here at Edna's grave.

It struck him suddenly that he ought to have brought flowers, something...a keepsake of some sort. His boxes of stuff were still in the Mercury, and he looked out across the hundred yards of rainy night toward the shadowy station wagon, picturing the clusters of quartz crystals they'd brought home from Death Valley and the pair of conical ceramic tornadoes from Edna's family reunion back in Kansas.

But what would he do with them? — scatter salt and pepper shakers across the grave like amulets? He knelt in the grass and ran his hand over the wet squares of turf fitted over the grave, and he felt the freshening rain patter against his slicker. He didn't bother with the umbrella now, but pulled the hat brim down over his forehead, closed his eyes, and tried to pray.

Prayer didn't come easily. He tried again, trying to concentrate, to focus, but almost at once he doubted his own sincerity, and the prayer fell to pieces. His father had told him years ago that a man couldn't pray when he was drunk, and although Jimmerson wasn't a drinking man, he had enough experience to take his meaning. Now it seemed to him that a guilty man had an even more precarious time praying than a drunken man, and for a long time his mind went round and round with partly formed apologetic phrases, half of them addressed to Edna, half addressed to the sky, until finally he shoved the hat back off his head and knelt in the rain with his forehead in his hands, utterly defeated.

He looked up finally to find the moon high in the sky, free of the walnut grove now. Down by the fish pond there was the shadow of Gladstone waiting patiently in his yellow slicker on one of the concrete benches. Jimmerson rose to his feet, his knees creaking beneath him, and walked carefully downhill to the path, where he looked back at Edna's grave.

She wouldn't speak to him. She couldn't. She had gone on.

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Jimmerson stood once again in the room with the clock and the flowers, where he had just signed the work order for Edna's headstone — her true headstone, a simple granite slab: loving wife of Doyle Jimmerson, marriage date as well as birth and death. Jimmerson had contracted for the plot adjacent to hers, too, and paid for a twin headstone for himself.

"I'm afraid I still don't entirely understand Edna's death," he said, standing finally in the open doorway.

"No less than I do, perhaps," Gladstone told him. "These deaths are always a mystery — the secret of the deceased, you know. I'm familiar with the physical manifestations at the end, of course, but the progress of the disease itself is not in my province."

Jimmerson nodded. "So it's not a virus? It's not something she caught?"

"Caught?" He shook his head. "No more than you'd say that a fish catches a baited hook. Rather the other way around."

"Hook? What do you mean?"

"Let's just say that voluntary dwindling isn't entirely voluntary, Mr. Jimmerson. It's voluntary in the main, of course. As I understand it, no one dwindles unless he chooses to dwindle. But the process can be... *facilitated*, perhaps. Suggested."

"Facilitated how?" The Frenchman's face leaped into his mind again, complete with the fact of Mrs. Crandle's apparently despising the man. He had been right! — the man was a cad, although the knowledge of having been right looked like damnation to him. Had he left Edna to some sort of murderer?

"I'm rather at a loss," Gladstone said. "It's my policy to know nothing more than it pays me to know. I might be able to help you, though, although the word 'help'...." He shook his head.

"I'd appreciate that, Mr. Gladstone. Anything you can do for me."

Gladstone stared at him again, narrowing his eyes. "You recall the man in the embalming room, tethered to the cord...?"

"Yes, of course."

"He told me much the same thing once, not so very long ago. Death of an old friend, in his case. They'd had some kind of sad falling out and hadn't spoken in years. So I'll caution you to be particularly careful of

what you learn, Mr. Jimmerson. And I'll tell you that Mr. des Laumes has purchased more than one headstone in his day."

**W**ITH THE HELP of Gladstone's map, Jimmerson found the curiosity shop downtown. It was near the Plaza, and from the sidewalk the shop was apparently empty. The linoleum floor was cracked and buckled, scattered with yellowed newsprint and empty White Rock and Nehi soft drink bottles that hadn't been sold in grocery stores for years. The windows were hung with cobweb, and the broad sills were covered with a heavy layer of dust and dead bugs and a litter of old business cards. Jimmerson and Edna had often remarked on the shop when they'd walked downtown. Leases near the Plaza were at a premium, yet the shop had gone untenanted since either of them could remember.

As he stood outside, looking in at the window, it seemed to him that the place had a curious perspective to it. He couldn't quite tell how deep it was. The walls were hung with mirrors, dim with dust, and the hazy reflections, depending upon where he stood, made the store appear sometimes to be prodigiously deep, sometimes to be a space so narrow that it might have been one-dimensional, cleverly painted on the window glass. The front door, weathered and paint-scaled, was nailed shut, and a number of envelopes had been dumped through the brass mail slot over the years, many of them with long out-of-date postage stamps.

Gladstone's map led him around the corner, past a Middle Eastern deli and a shop selling Italian antiques. The day was windy, the sky full of tearing clouds, and Jimmerson pulled his coat tightly around him, turning another corner and heading north now, searching for the mouth of the alley that Gladstone had assured him lay at the back of the old buildings. There was the smell of Turkish coffee in the air, and of wet sidewalks and open Dumpsters, and he walked straight past the alley before he knew it. It wasn't really an alley as such, but was a circular doorway in the brick facade of the buildings, and it opened into a sort of courtyard, a patch of gray sky showing far overhead. Jimmerson peered into the dimly lit recess before stepping over the high curb and into the sheltered twilight. The courtyard was utterly silent, the walls blocking even the traffic noise on the street. He walked hesitantly along the wall, trailing his right hand, and

watching to see if there was anyone about. He felt as if he were trespassing, and he was ready to apologize and get the hell out if he were challenged at all. But the courtyard was empty, the brick pavers up in weeds as if no one had walked there for an age.

A row of high, shuttered windows with an iron balcony looked down from the second story; the lower story was nothing but weathered brick, uninterrupted except for a single deeply set door with a heavy brass knocker and a tiny peephole. Jimmerson stood looking for a moment at the door. Gladstone had described it to him, and, seeing it now, he felt as if he were at the edge of something, as if something were pending, as if opening it would change things irreversibly and forever.

A gust of wind blew into the courtyard, kicking up a little wind devil of leaves and trash and dust, and Jimmerson ducked into the doorway recess, out of the turmoil. He put his hand on the door knocker, but the door was apparently unlatched, and it immediately slammed open, propelled by the wind. Jimmerson slipped inside, pressing the door shut behind him, and stood for a moment in the quiet darkness, letting his eyes adjust. He heard sounds now, the shuffling of paper and a noise that sounded like the muted cawing of a crow, and he stepped carefully along down the hallway toward what was clearly the back door of a shop that fronted on the Plaza, the door's wavy glass window dimly lighted from the other side. Hesitantly, he rapped on the glass, ready to convince himself that there was nobody there, that Gladstone was a lunatic. The floating corpse might as easily have been a clever balloon. And Mrs. Crandle was so stupefyingly obscure that...

He heard a voice from beyond the door, and he knocked again, harder this time.

"Come in," someone said, and Jimmerson turned the knob and pushed the door open, looking past it at the interior of a cluttered curiosity shop. He nearly tripped over an elephant's-foot umbrella stand that held a dozen dusty umbrellas, some of them so old and shopworn that their fabric was like dusty lace. There were thousands of books stacked on open shelves, tilting against the walls, piled in glass-fronted cases alongside crystal wineglasses and flasks and decanters. There was a tarnished silver ice bucket with *S.S. Titanic* inscribed on the front, and fishbowls full of marbles, and no end of salt and pepper shakers — grinning moon men and

comical dogs and ceramic renditions of characters out of ancient comic strips. The skeleton of a bird hung from the ceiling, and beneath it stood propped-open trunks full of doilies and tablecloths and old manuscripts. A painting of an ape and another of a clipper ship reclined against a long wooden counter scattered with boxes of old silverware and candlesticks and hinges and dismantled chandeliers. The silver seemed to shimmer where it lay, and there appeared above it a brief crackling of flame, like a witch fire, that died out again with a whoosh of exhalation.

He noticed a crow on a high perch, staring down at him, its head tilted sideways. The crow hopped along the perch, clicking its beak, and then said, "Come in," three times in succession. Beyond the crow's perch, back past the clutter of collectibles and curiosities, lay more rooms full of stuff. He could make out toasters and fans and other pieces of electrical gadgetry, old clothes and musical instruments and coffee mugs and articles of wooden furniture, most of it apparently thrift store junk. Back in the shadows something rose slowly into the air and then descended again, and there was the brief sound of moaning from somewhere deep in the shop, and another gleam of witch fire that ran along the tops of the books leaving a ghostly trail behind it that drifted lazily to the ceiling.

There was a movement behind the counter, and Jimmerson saw that a man sat back there on a tall stool. He was a small man with compressed features, possibly a dwarf, and he read a heavy book, his brow furrowed with concentration, as if he were unaware that Jimmerson had come into the shop.

A sign on the counter read, "Merchandise taken in pawn. Any items left over thirty days sold for expenses." Another sign read, "All items a penny. No refunds." Jimmerson looked around again, this time in growing astonishment. The shop was packed with collectibles, some of them clearly valuable antiques. A suit of armor in the corner appeared to be ancient — a museum piece — and there was a glass case of jewelry that sparkled like fireflies even in the dim shop light. The all-items-a-penny sign must be some sort of obscure, lowball joke.

"Selling or buying?" the dwarf asked him suddenly, and Jimmerson realized that he had put the book down and leaned forward on his stool. There was a lamp on the counter, a great brass fish that illuminated half

his face. The other half remained in shadow, giving him a slightly sinister appearance. "Lucius Pillbody," the dwarf said, extending his hand.

"Doyle Jimmerson," Jimmerson told him. "I guess I'm really just...curious."

"People who are just curious can't find me," Pillbody said. "So don't be coy. Either you've got something to sell to me or else you're looking to buy."

"I'd simply like to ask you a couple of questions, if I could. My wife died recently. Her name was Edna Jimmerson."

"*That* Jimmerson! Of course. Wonderful woman. Very good customer."

"She bought a good deal, then?" He could easily imagine Edna buying almost any of this stuff, taking it home by the bagful — although he hadn't seen any evidence of it in the house aside from the odds and ends on the bedside table.

"I can't recall that she bought anything," Pillbody said. "But then that's hardly surprising. Why would she?"

"Well... A penny? Why *wouldn't* she?"

"Because, Mr. Jimmerson, like most of our customers she was interested in lightening ship, throwing the ballast overboard, you know, unencumbering herself."

"I guess I *don't* know. I've been away."

"I mean to say that she pawned a goodly number of her own possessions." He waved his hand, gesturing at the lumber of stuff in the shop. "Heaven knows how much of this was hers. I don't keep books, Mr. Jimmerson. I used to separate things out a bit — Mr. Jones on the east wall and Mr. Smith on the west wall, figuratively speaking, which worked well enough if Smith and Jones were willing to let go of a great deal of merchandise. But what about Mr. so-and-so, who came in with a single item and never returned?"

Jimmerson shook his head helplessly.

"Well, I could tag it, of course, and arrange it on a shelf, alphabetically, say. But there were a hundred Mr. so-and-sos and I was always losing track. Tags would fall off. I'd have a busy week and have to find a second shelf to handle the overstock. In thirty days, of course, the merchandise would come off that shelf and find its way onto yet another shelf. And nobody

ever claims their pawn, Mr. Jimmerson. In all my years in the business only a couple of resolute customers have changed their mind and asked for their merchandise back. Possessions, Mr. Jimmerson, are a great weight to most people, and I'm afraid that your wife was no exception, if you'll pardon my saying so."

Jimmerson nodded blankly. Apparently he knew far less about Edna than he thought he did. He had never really paid attention, never tried to see the world the way she saw it. He had always been too caught up in his own point of view, in his own way of seeing things. Even with this damned Frenchman. Edna obviously found something in the man that she couldn't find in Doyle Jimmerson. What was it? Jimmerson had never asked, never even thought about it.

"Anyway, now there's no order to things," Pillbody said. "Smith and Jones are scattered far and wide. I made some effort — when was it? mid-century, I guess — to order things according to *type*, but to tell you the truth, that didn't work out very well either. A certain amount of the merchandise is — what do you call it? Off color, perhaps. Obscene is nearer the mark. I'm talking about the product, let's say, of a particularly disturbed mind, of the human id at its darker levels: your murderer, your pervert. You'd be astonished at what you'd find in here, Mr. Jimmerson. Objective tokens of murder and rape. Illicit sex. The sort of trash that you or I would repress, you know, hide away from the light. Does that astonish you?"

"I don't know," Jimmerson said. "I guess I *am* astonished."

"All of it went into the room back in the southeast corner, what I used to call the parlor room. Full to overflowing, I can assure you. Now and then a customer would come in, feigning interest in books or jewelry or what have you, but by and by he'd disappear into the parlor room, and I knew what sort of thing he was *really* after, groping around back there in the dark. There was one man, a Mr. Ricketts, who frequented the parlor room. One of my best customers, if you want to define the word purely in terms of copper coins, which none of us do. Mint?"

"Pardon me?" Jimmerson asked. He was utterly baffled now. Murder? Perversion in the parlor room? No *wonder* this place was hidden away.

The man held out a small bowl of white mints. Jimmerson shook his head, and the man shrugged. "Looks just like depression glass, doesn't it?"

He tilted the bowl, allowing Jimmerson to get a better look at it. It was pink, and had a sort of repeating pineapple pattern on it. There was something not quite symmetrical about the bowl, though, as if it had gotten hot and partly collapsed of its own weight, and it had a heavy seam down the center of it, as if it had broken and been welded back together. In each of the pineapples there was a depiction of the same human face, vaguely angry, its eyes half shut.

The face looked remarkably familiar to Jimmerson. The bowl too, for that matter, although he couldn't for the life of him place it. The dwarf set it down carefully.

"What finally happened," Pillbody said, "was that the parlor room began to stink. Even now you've noticed a certain smell on the air." He squinted seriously, as if Jimmerson might dispute this somehow, but Jimmerson nodded in agreement. He had gotten a whiff of it now and then, an undefinable smell of rot. "It was almost poetic. Artistic you might say. The smell would draw this man Ricketts the way rotten meat draws flies, not to put too fine a point on it. Well, I simply couldn't stand it any longer. I have to work here. If I had my way, I'd throw all of it out, straight into the bin. But then of course I don't have my way, do I? Which of us does? So finally I fell upon the idea of scattering the stuff throughout the store, an item here, another item there, and when they weren't any longer in close proximity, they stank a good deal less, although it took years for them to really settle down. Meanwhile I moved — how shall I put it? — a more pleasant selection of merchandise into the parlor room. Much of what we receive here is not altogether unpleasant, after all, at least to you or I. The problem was essentially solved, aside from the telltale remnants surfacing here and there. Too much order, I said to myself, and you start to breed problems. Things start to stink. Unfortunately, one can still detect the odor back there in the parlor room, especially on a rainy day, when the air is heavy. It's like spilled perfume that's soaked into the floorboards. And of course I still get the same sort of customer nosing his way back there, although Mr. Ricketts has been dead these twenty years. Killed by his own filthy habits, I might add."

Jimmerson nodded blankly, then picked up the candy dish again and looked hard at the pattern in the glass, at the unpleasant repeated face....

*It was his own face.*

He was suddenly certain of it, and the realization nearly throttled him. He looked in surprise at Pillbody, who merely shrugged.

"As you've no doubt realized, that was one of your wife's items, Mr. Jimmerson."

"Can I buy it?" He hardly knew what he meant by asking. If it had belonged to Edna, though, he wanted it, no matter what it cost. No matter how strange and inexplicable.

"I'm afraid that raises a fairly delicate question, Mr. Jimmerson."

"What question? If I know the answer..." He gestured helplessly.

"Has Mrs. Jimmerson...passed on?"

"Last week."

"Then the bowl's for sale. Let me find something else to put the mints in." He rummaged around under the counter, finally drawing out what looked like a tin basin. "I got this from a barber's wife," he said. "Take a look." He held the basin up so that Jimmerson looked into the bottom side, which was highly polished, almost a mirror. Instead of his own reflection Jimmerson saw a man with a beard looking back out at him, his throat cut from ear to ear, blood running down into the white cloth tied around his neck. He recoiled from the sight of it, and Pillbody set it down on the counter.

"Doesn't affect the flavor of the mints at all," he said, and he dumped the candy out of Edna's bowl and into the basin. "That'll be a penny." He held out his hand.

"Just a penny?"

"Just one. Everything's a penny. But I'll warn you. If you try to return it, you'll pay considerably more to get rid of it than you paid to possess it. Could be entirely impossible, out of the question, unthinkable."

"I don't want to return it," Jimmerson said, and he dug in his pocket for a penny. The dwarf took the coin from him and set it on the counter. Jimmerson looked around then, suddenly certain that he could find more of Edna's things, and straightaway he saw a familiar pair of salt and pepper shakers — ceramic tornadoes, one of them grinning and the other looking like the day of judgment.

"Were these...?" Jimmerson started to ask.

"Those too. Only two weeks ago."

This was uncanny. Jimmerson had the same shakers in his box in the

back of the Merc. Except his were smaller, he was sure of it now, and the faces not so clearly defined. One of these had the unmistakable appearance of Edna's dead Aunt Betsy, and the ceramic platform that they stood on was divided by a piece of picket fence that recalled the rickety fence around the Kansas farm where Edna had grown up. His own salt and peppers had no such fence.

"You're certain these were hers?" Jimmerson asked.

"Absolutely."

"I don't recall that she owned any such thing. We bought a similar pair years ago, in the Midwest, but they're different from these. They're in my car, in fact, parked out front." He waved his hand, but realized that he no longer had any idea where "out front" was. His shoulders ached terribly, and he felt as if he had been carrying a heavy pack on his back for hours. His ears were plugged, too, and he wiggled his jaw to clear them.

"These were *very* recent acquisitions," Pillbody said. "Mrs. Jimmerson brought them to me along with the candy bowl. It's not surprising that you were unaware of them."

Jimmerson fished out another penny. "All right, then. I'll take these, too," he said.

Pillbody shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Jimmerson."

"I don't understand."

"One thing at a time, sir. You'll overload your circuitry otherwise. You'd need heavy gauge wiring. Good clean copper. The best insulation."

"*Circuitry? Insulation?* By God then I guess I'll take the whole shebang," Jimmerson said, suddenly getting angry. What a lot of tomfoolery! He gestured at the counter, at the books in the wall behind it, taking it all in with a wave of his hand. He pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and found a twenty-dollar bill. "Start with the jewelry," he said, slapping the money down, "and then we'll move on to this collection of salt shakers. We'll need boxes, because I've got more money where this came from. I'll clean this place out, Mr. Pillbody, if that's what it takes to get Edna's merchandise back, and if my money's no good here, then we'll take it up with the Chamber of Commerce and the Better Business Bureau this very afternoon."

Pillbody stared at him. "Let me show you a little something," he said quietly, echoing Gladstone's words, and he reached down and pulled aside

a curtain in the front of the counter. Inside, on a preposterously heavy iron stand, sat what appeared to be a garden elf or a manlike gargoyle, perhaps carved out of stone. Its face had a desperate, constricted look to it, and it squatted on its hams, its head on its knees and its hands pressed against the platform it sat on. "Go ahead and pick it up," Pillbody said. "That's right. Get a grip on it."

Baffled, Jimmerson bent over, put his hands on the statue, and tried to lift it, but the thing was immovable, apparently epoxied to the platform on which it sat. Seen up close, its face was stunningly lifelike, although its features were pinched and distorted as if by some vast gravity of emotion. Jimmerson stepped away from it, appalled. "What the hell is it?" he asked. "What's going on here?"

"It's mighty heavy, isn't it?"

"This is some kind of trick," Jimmerson said.

"Oh, it's no trick," Pillbody said. "It's a dead man. He's so shatteringly compressed that I guarantee you that a floor jack wouldn't lift him. A crane might do the trick, if you could get one in through the door."

"I don't understand," Jimmerson said, all the anger gone now. He was sure somehow that Pillbody wasn't lying, any more than Gladstone had been lying about the floating corpse. "Does this have something to do with Edna, with the dwindling that Mr. Gladstone mentioned?"

"The dwindling?" Pillbody said. "After a fashion I suppose it does. This was a gentleman who quite simply spent too much money. I don't have any idea what he *thought* he was buying, but he endeavored, much like yourself, to purchase several hundred dollars' worth of merchandise all at once. He was, how shall I put it? A parlor room client, perhaps. In my own defense, I'll say that I had never had any experience along those lines, and I quite innocently agreed to sell it to him. This was the result." He gestured at the garden elf.

"How?" Jimmerson said. "I don't..."

Pillbody shrugged theatrically. "I didn't either. The man was simply crushed beneath the weight of it, piled on top of him suddenly like that. Surely you can feel it, Mr. Jimmerson, the terrible pressure in this shop?"

"Yes," Jimmerson said. His very bones seemed to grind together within him now, and he looked around for some place to sit down. He thought he heard the floorboards groaning, the very foundation creaking,

and there was the sound of things settling roundabout him: the crinkle of old paper, the sigh of what sounded like air brakes, a grainy sound like sand being shoveled into a sack, the witch fires leaping and dying...

"It's like the sea bottom," Pillbody whispered. "The desperate pressures of the human soul, as heavy and as poisonous as mercury when they're decocted. Our gentleman was simply crushed." He shook his head sadly. "I can't tell you how much work it was to get him up onto the iron plinth here. We had to reinforce the floor. Here, let me get you a chair, Mr. Jimmerson."

He dragged a rickety folding chair from behind the counter now and levered it open, then drew the drape across the front of the thing in the counter cubbyhole. Jimmerson sat down gratefully, but immediately there was the sound of wooden joints snapping, and the seat of the chair broke loose from the legs and back, and Jimmerson slammed down onto the wooden floor where he sat in a heap among the broken chair parts, trying to catch his breath.

"My advice is simply to take the candy dish, Mr. Jimmerson. Tomorrow's another day. Tomorrow's always another day."

Jimmerson climbed heavily to his feet, steadying himself against the counter. He took the dish and nodded his thanks, and Pillbody picked his penny up off the counter and dropped it into a slot cut into the back of the fish lamp. Jimmerson plodded heavily toward the door. He had the curious feeling that he was falling, that he was so monstrously heavy he was plummeting straight through the center of the Earth and would shoot feet first out the far side. He reached unsteadily for the doorknob, yanked the door open, and stepped into the dim hallway, where, as if from a tremendous distance, he heard the dull metallic clang of the penny finally hitting the bottom of the brass fish. There was the sound of an avalanche of tumbling coins, and then silence when the door banged shut behind him.

He felt the wind in his face now, the corridor stretching away in front of him like an asphalt highway, straight as an arrow, its vanishing point visible in the murky distance. Moss-hung trees rushed along on either side of him, and he knew he was on the road again, recognized the southern Louisiana landscape, the road south of New Orleans where he and Edna had found a farmhouse bed and breakfast. The memory flooded in upon

him, and he gripped the candy dish, pressing it against his chest as the old Pontiac bounced along the rutted road, past chickens and low-lying swampland, weathered hovels and weedy truck patches. Edna sat silently beside him, gazing out the window. Neither of them had spoken for a half an hour.

She had bought the candy dish from an antique store along the highway — late yesterday afternoon? It seemed like a lifetime ago. It seemed as if everything he could remember had happened to him late yesterday afternoon, his entire past rolling up behind the Pontiac like a snail shell. The memory of their argument — his argument — was abruptly clear in his mind. He heard his own voice, remembered how clever it had been when he had called her a junkaholic, and talked about how she shouldn't spend so much of their money on worthless trash. He saw the two of them in that little wooden room with the sloped ceiling, the four-poster bed: how after giving her a piece of his mind, he had knocked the candy dish onto the floor and broken it in two. She had accused him of knocking it off on purpose, which of course he said he hadn't, and he had gotten sore, and told her to haul the rest of the junk she'd bought out of its bags and boxes — the ceramics and glassware, the thimbles and postcards and knickknacks — and he'd cheerfully fling the whole pile of it into the duck pond.

He shut his eyes, listening to the tires hum on the highway. *Had* he knocked the dish onto the floor on purpose? Certainly he hadn't meant to break it, to hurt Edna. It was just that.... Damn it, he couldn't remember what it was. All justification had vanished. His years-old anger looked nutty to him now. What damned difference did it make that Edna wanted a pink glass candy dish? He wished to God he had bought her a truckload of them. His cherished anger had been a bottomless well, but now that she was gone, now that the whole issue of candy dishes was a thing of the irretrievable past, he couldn't summon any anger at all. It was simply empty, that well.

He glanced out the car window at a half dozen white egrets that stood stilt-legged in a marsh, and he reached across the seat and tried to pat her leg, but he couldn't reach her. She sat too far away from him now. He accelerated, pushing the car over a low rise, the sun glaring so brightly on the highway ahead that he turned his face away. He held the dish out to

her, but she ignored him, watching the landscape through the window, and the sorrow that hovered in the air around her like a shade was confused in his mind with the upholstery smell of their old pink and gray Pontiac. The car had burned oil — a quart every few days — but they had driven it through forty-two states, put a lot of highway behind them, a lot of miles.

"Take it," he whispered.

But even as he spoke it seemed to him that she was fading, slipping away from him. There was the smell of hot oil burning on the exhaust manifold, and the sun was far too bright through the windshield, and the tires hummed like a swarm of bees, and the candy dish slipped out of his hand and fell into two pieces on the gray fabric of the car seat.

When he came to himself he was outside again, standing in the wind, the door that led to the curiosity shop closed behind him. He searched the paving stones for the broken candy dish, but it was simply gone, vanished. He tried the door, but it was locked now. He banged the door knocker, hammering away, and the sound of the blows rang through the courtyard, echoing from the high brick walls.

**T**HE CAFÉ DES LAUMES lay two blocks west of the Plaza, near the old train station. It shared a wall with Tubbs Cordage Company, and across the street lay a vacant lot strewn with broken concrete from a long-ago demolished building. In the rainy evening gloom the café looked tawdry and cheerless despite the lights glowing inside. There was no sign hanging outside, just an address in brass numbers and a menu taped into the window. He watched the café door from the Mercury, not quite knowing what he wanted, what he was going to do. He opened the glove box and looked again at the .38 that lay inside, and then he gazed for a moment through the windshield, his mind adrift, the rain falling softly on the lamplit street. He shut the glove box and climbed tiredly out of the car, walking across the street and around the side of the building, its windows nearly hidden by overgrown bushes.

He was alone on the sidewalk, the cordage company closed up, the nearest headlights three blocks away on the boulevard. He ducked in among the bushes, high-stepping through a tangle of ivy and parting the branches of an elephant ear so that he could see past the edge of the

window. The café was nearly empty — just an old man tiredly eating a cutlet at a corner table and two girls with bobbed hair huddled deep in conversation over a tureen of mussels. Jimmerson saw then that there was a third table occupied, a private booth near the kitchen door. It was des Laumes himself, his curled hair brushed back, a bottle of wine on the table in front of him. His plate was heaped high with immense snails, and he probed in one of them with a long-tined fork, dragging out a piece of yellow snail meat and thrusting it into his mouth, wiping dripped sauce away with a napkin. His chin whiskers worked back and forth as he chewed, and the sight of it made Jimmerson instantly furious. He thought of going back out to the car, fetching the .38 out of the glove box, and giving the sorry bastard a taste of a different sort of slug....

But then he recalled the broken candy dish, and somehow the anger vanished like a penny down a storm drain, and when he searched his mind for it, he couldn't find it. To hell with des Laumes. He hunched out of the bushes again and walked up the sidewalk to where an alley led along behind the café. The building was deeper than it had appeared to be, a warren of rooms that ran back behind the cordage company. It was an old building, too — hard to say how old, turn of the century, probably, perhaps an old wooden flophouse that had been converted to a café. There were a couple of windows aglow some distance along the wall, and beyond them a door with a little piece of roof over it. Jimmerson tried the door, but it was locked, bolted from the inside. He spotted a pile of wooden pallets farther up the alley, and he hurried toward them, pulling one of the pallets off the pile and dragging it along the asphalt until he stood beneath the window. He tilted it gingerly against the wall and climbed up the rungs until he could see in over the sill.

A high-ceilinged room lay beyond the window, a table in the corner, a row of beds along one long wall, a big iron safe near the door, some packing crates and excelsior piled in a heap on the floor. The beds rose one atop the other like bunks in an opium den. Each of the beds had a small shelf built at the foot end, with a tiny wineglass hanging upside down in a slot, and a small decanter of greenish liquid, possibly wine, standing on the shelf. Three of the beds were hidden by curtains, and Jimmerson wondered if there were sleepers behind them, like dope fiends on the nod. He heard a rhythmic sighing on the air of the alley around him — what

sounded like heavy, regular breathing, a somnolent, lonely sound that reminded him somehow of Edna's deathbed. A man entered the room now; it was the old cutlet eater from inside the café. He moved haltingly, as if he were half asleep, and without a pause to so much as take off his shoes, he climbed into one of the bunks and pulled the curtain closed.

Another of the curtains moved, pushing out away from the bed hidden behind it, and as Jimmerson watched, a man in a wrinkled suit and stubble beard rolled out from beneath the curtain and balanced precariously on the side rail of the bunk, apparently still asleep. Jimmerson braced himself, expecting him to tumble off onto the floor, but instead he tilted slowly back and forth, as if buoyed up by whatever strange currents circulated in the room. He muttered something inaudible, and the muttering dissolved into a muffled sob. And then he tilted forward again so that he seemed to cling to the bed with a knee and an elbow. There was the sudden crash of something hitting the wooden floorboards directly beneath him, and at that instant he lofted toward the ceiling like Gladstone's dead man. But there was a tether tied to his ankle, the other end of the tether affixed to an iron ring bolted to the bed frame, and the man leveled off and floated peacefully just below the ceiling.

The object on the floor was clearly a teddy bear, or at least the replica of a teddy bear, and from where Jimmerson stood it appeared to have been contrived with uncanny verisimilitude — apparently out of rusty cast iron. It looked worn from years of handling, its nose pushed aside, one of its eyes missing, a clump of stuffing like steel wool shoving out of a tear in its leg.

Along the wall opposite stood an open cabinet divided into junk-filled cubbyholes, much of it reminiscent of the stuff in Pillbody's shop — bric-a-brac mostly, travel souvenirs and keepsakes. Jimmerson made out what appeared to be an old letterman's sweater, a smoking pipe, a carved seashell, a tiny abacus, a copper Jell-o mold in the shape of a child's face, an exquisitely detailed statue of a nude woman, her face downcast, her hands crossed demurely in front of her. He saw then that there were name placards on each of the cubbyholes, hung on cup hooks as if for easy removal.

He stepped backward off his makeshift ladder, his hands trembling, and started back down the alley toward the street, although he knew

straightaway that he wasn't going anywhere. Gladstone had warned him about this, so it wasn't any vast surprise. He had largely come to understand it, too — what Pillbody's curiosities amounted to, what it was that Edna had sold, why she had grown more and more vacant as the months had slipped past. He thought about the odds and ends on her bedside table, the medicinal-smelling bottle with the green stain, the liqueur glass, and he wondered if one of these narrow beds had been hers, a sort of home away from home.

Retracing his steps to the pallet, he climbed back up to the lighted window and forced himself to read the names one by one, spotting Edna's right away, the third cubbyhole from the left. He could see that there was something inside, pushed back into the shadows where it was nearly hidden from view, something that caught the light. He strained to make it out — a perfume bottle? A glass figurine? He searched his memory, but couldn't find such an object anywhere.

The door opened at the far end of the room now, and an old woman walked in, followed by des Laumes. Her hair was a corona of white around her head, and she was wrinkled enough to be a hundred years old. The floating man had descended halfway to the floor, as if he were slowly losing buoyancy, and the old woman grabbed his shoe and a handful of his coat and steered him toward his bed again, pushing him past his curtain so that he was once again hidden from view. She bent over to pick up the thing on the floor, but des Laumes had to help her with it, as if it were incredibly heavy. Together they shoved it into a cubbyhole marked "Peterson." She turned and left then, without a word.

Des Laumes remained behind, looking around himself as if suspicious that something was out of order. He appeared to be sniffing the air, and he held a hand up, extending his first finger as if gauging the direction of the wind. Jimmerson moved to the corner of the window, hiding himself from view. A moment later he peered carefully past the window casing again.

The Frenchman held the statue of the woman in his hand now, scrutinizing it carefully. Then he peeked inside one of the cubbyholes and retrieved a glass paperweight that appeared to Jimmerson to be packed with hundreds of tiny glass flowers. Des Laumes held it to the light, nodded heavily, and walked across to the safe, spinning the dial. He swung

the door open, placed the statue and the paperweight inside, and shut the door.

Jimmerson climbed down again and set off up the alley. His thinking had narrowed to a tiny focus, and his hands had steadied. Within a few seconds he had the .38 out of the glove compartment. He slipped the gun into his trousers pocket, then walked straight across the street, up the flagstone path to the café. The door opened and the two girls with the bobbed hair came out, arguing heatedly now, neither one of them looking happy. Jimmerson slipped past them through the open door, face to face with des Laumes himself, who stood there playing the host now. The Frenchman reached for a menu, gestured, and moved off toward a table before realizing who Jimmerson was. He turned around halfway across the empty café, a look of theatrical surprise on his face. "What a pleasure," he said.

"Can I have a word with you somewhere private?" Jimmerson spoke to him in the tone of an old and indebted friend.

"It's very private here," the man said to him. "How can I help you?" His face was bloated and veined, as if corrupted from years of unnameable abuse, and he reeked of cologne, which only half hid a ghastly odor reminiscent of the stink in Pillbody's "parlor room."

"Help me?" Jimmerson asked, hauling the gun out of his pocket and pointing at the Frenchman's chest. "Better to help yourself. I'll follow you into the back." He gestured with the gun.

"I've been shot before," des Laumes told him, shrugging with indifference, and Jimmerson pulled the trigger, aiming high, blowing the hell out of a brass wall sconce with a glass shade. The sound of the gun was crashingly loud, and startled horror passed across des Laumes's face as he threw his hands up.

Someone peered out of the kitchen — the chef apparently — and Jimmerson waved the pistol at him. "Get the hell out of here," he shouted, and the man ducked back into the kitchen. There was the sound of a woman's voice then, and running feet. A door slammed, and the kitchen was silent. "Let's go," Jimmerson said, aiming the gun with both hands at the Frenchman's stomach now. The man turned and headed back through the café, past the kitchen door, down a hallway and into the room with the

beds. Keeping the pistol aimed at des Laumes, Jimmerson reached into Edna's cubbyhole and pulled out the trinket inside — a glass replica of what appeared to be the old Pontiac.

He hesitated for a moment before slipping it into his pocket, steeling himself for the disorienting shift into the past, into the realm of Edna's memory. Probably he would lose des Laumes in the process. The Frenchman would simply take the pistol away from him, maybe shoot him right then and there....

But nothing happened. He might as well have dropped his car keys into his pocket. "The safe," Jimmerson said.

Des Laumes shrugged again. "What is it that you want?" he asked, turning his palms up. "Surely..."

"What I want is to shoot you to pieces," Jimmerson told him. "I don't know what you are — some kind of damn vampire I guess. But I don't have one damn thing to lose by blowing the living hell out of you right now. You should know that, you...stinking overblown bearded twit." He stepped forward, closing in with the pistol as if he would shove it up the Frenchman's nose. The man fell back a step, putting up his hands again and shaking his head. "Now open the safe," Jimmerson told him.

The Frenchman spun the dial and opened the safe door, then stepped aside and waved at it as if he were introducing a circus act. "Clean it out," Jimmerson told him. "Put everything into the boxes." He picked up a packing crate and set it on the floor in front of the safe, and des Laumes took objects out one by one and laid them in, packing the excelsior around them.

"This is common theft," the Frenchman said, shaking his head sadly.

"That's right," Jimmerson told him. "And it'll be a common hole in the head for the good Pierre if he doesn't hurry the hell up. That's it, monsieur, the statue, too. Now the stuff in the cabinet. Fill those boxes." He thought about the chef, the rest of them that had fled through the back door. Would they go to the police? He made up his mind right there on the spot: if he heard sirens, if the door flew open and des Laumes was saved, Jimmerson would shoot the man dead before he handed over the gun.

Des Laumes filled a second packing crate and then a third, until every last piece of bric-a-brac lay in the crates. Except for the glass automobile, Jimmerson hadn't recognized any of it as Edna's. And even if des Laumes

knew the source of the things in the safe, he wouldn't tell Jimmerson the truth about them. The man was an end-to-end lie, with nothing at all to recommend him but his idiotic beard like a runover tar brush. Jimmerson was heartily sick of the sight of it, and with the .38 he motioned des Laumes against the wall, away from the sleeping people on the beds. He easily pictured killing the man, shooting the hell out of him, leaving him dead and bloody on the ground.

But somehow the taste of it was like dust in his mouth. How would there be any satisfaction in it? He could as easily picture Gladstone shaking his head sadly, and the idea filled him with shame. More trouble, more pain — anger like a drug, like alcohol, like lunacy, having its way with him again.

There were no sirens yet, no need to hurry.

"Sit down," he said, and des Laumes, his face white now, slumped obediently against the wall. Holding the gun on him, Jimmerson removed one of the liqueur-filled decanters from its niche in the shelf above an empty bed. "Drink it like a good boy," he said, handing it to him, and he held the pistol against the man's ear.

De Laumes stared at him, as if he were making up his mind. He shook his head feebly and started to speak. And then, as if suddenly changing his mind, he heaved a long sigh, shrugged, and drank off the contents of the decanter.

"That's it," Jimmerson said. "Down the hatch." He fetched out another decanter, and forced him to drink that one, too, and then a third and a fourth. All in all there must have been two quarts of the stuff, and the room reeked with the camphor and weeds smell of it.

Des Laumes's face had rapidly taken on a green pallor, and he looked around himself now, a growing bewilderment and horror in his eyes. He clutched his expanding stomach and slowly began to rock forward and backward, his head bouncing with increasing force off the wall behind, his eyes jerking upward in their sockets, a green scum at the corners of his mouth. Jimmerson backed away in case the man got sick, watching as the rocking intensified and des Laumes began to jackknife at the waist like a mad contortionist, his forehead driving impossibly against the floorboards, a piglike grunting issuing from somewhere deep inside him.

Jimmerson awakened the four sleepers, two women and two men —

the old cutlet eater and poor Peterson. The women, both of whom still clutched their handbags, were surprisingly young and bedraggled, and they looked out from their beds, blinking their eyes, growing slowly aware of des Laumes's thrashing on the floor. One by one Jimmerson helped them down, untethering them from the beds, unbolting the back door and letting them out into the alley. Mr. Peterson walked like a man on the moon, high-stepping through the puddle, and it occurred to Jimmerson to offer him back his cast-iron teddy bear for ballast, but he saw that it wouldn't be a kindness to him. Soon enough he'd be heavy again.

When the four of them had reached the street, Jimmerson hauled the packing crates out into the night and then headed around the café to where the Mercury was parked. He climbed inside, fired it up, and swung around the corner into the alley, letting the engine idle while he loaded the crates into the rear of the car along with his own boxes of junk.

There was a noise from inside the café like rocks hitting the walls, and Jimmerson looked in through the door, which was partly blocked by des Laumes himself. The Frenchman had levitated a couple of feet off the floor, and his body spasmed in midair like a pupating insect in a cocoon. The room roundabout him was strewn with unidentifiable junk — rusty iron and dirty glass and earthy ceramic objects, misshapen and stinking. Jimmerson pulled the door shut and climbed into the Mercury, slamming the car door against the sounds of knocking and grunting and moaning, and backed away down the alley, swinging out into the street and accelerating toward home as the rain began to fall again. He reached into his pocket and took out the glass Pontiac, which he set carefully on the top of the dashboard so that it caught the rainy glow of passing headlights, and it was then that it dawned on him that he should have left des Laumes a penny.

He had needed every cubic inch of the big rental truck in order to clean out Pillbody's shop. The dwarf had made him sign a release, and had talked obscurely about Jimmerson's "aim being true." "On the up and up," he had said. "Solid copper wiring. No imperfections." But he had taken the thousands of pennies happily enough, although he had refused to drop them into the brass fish until Jimmerson had packed up what he wanted and driven away. Jimmerson had wanted it all, and Pillbody had worked

alongside him, running wheelbarrows full of curiosities out the back and across the courtyard to where Jimmerson had backed the truck up to the circular brick doorway of the courtyard.

The truck crept east along Maple Street now; the engine laboring, the overload springs jammed flat, the tires mashed against the rims, the truck bed heaving ominously from side to side. Jimmerson sat hunched in the driver's seat, which sagged beneath his weight, and he fought to see the road in front of him as bits and pieces of arcane and exotic imagery stuttered through his mind like subliminal messages, almost too rapidly to comprehend. His skin twitched and jerked with competing emotions: dark fears rising into euphoric happiness, dropping away again into canyons of sadness, soaring to heights of lunatic glee. Somewhere in the depths of his mind he heard the clatter of pennies cascading and was dimly aware of the howling of the truck engine and the smell of hot oil and burning rubber. There was the sound of a hose bursting, and a wild cloud of steam poured out from under the hood, and in the swirling vapors a startling array of faces appeared and disappeared. Edna's face came and went, and he recognized the face of the bearded man with the bloody neck, and felt a stab of vicious and shameless satisfaction for the duration of a blink of an eye, and then one face was replaced by another and another and another, a dozen at a time, a hundred — a tide of shifting visages soaking away into the sands of his ponderous and overloaded memory.

Now and then he came to himself, heard the truck creaking and groaning, saw that he had made his way some few feet farther up the road, felt the seat springs burrowing against his thighs, the cramping of muscles, the pressure on his bones and his teeth. His breath rasped in and out of his lungs and his head pounded and the truck engine steamed and roared. Edna's face appeared before him time and again now, and he was swept with her memories — the memory of a fire in a hearth on a rainy night, the two of them in easy chairs, an atmosphere of utter contentment that he squirreled away in his mind, holding fast to it, and yet at the same time crippled by the thought that she had given this memory away too, that joy might have become as great a burden to her as sorrow....

He saw that he was nearly at Oak Street, nearly home, and he cranked the steering wheel around to the right, felt the weight of the load shift ponderously, the truck tilting up onto two wheels. For a moment he thought he was going over, and in that impossibly long moment the

pennies continued to fall into Pillbody's brass fish, and the faces whirled in the steam in wild profusion, and Jimmerson felt himself crushed like a lump of coal by a vast, earth-heavy pressure.

**H**E OPENED his eyes when he felt the sun on his face next morning. He lay slumped on the seat in the cab of the truck, and he moved his arms and legs gingerly, testing for breaks and strains. His jaws ached, and his joints felt stiff and sore, as if he were recovering from a flu. He sat up and looked out the window. Somehow he had made it home, alive, although he had only the vaguest recollection of arriving—the truck shutting down with a metal-breaking clank, hard rain beating on the roof off and on through the night.

He opened the door and stepped down onto the street, seeing that he had driven the passenger side of the truck right up over the curb, and the wheels were sunk now in the wet lawn. Most of the paint was gone from the truck body, apparently shivered off, and the tires were flayed to pieces. The truck bed was nearly emptied, scattered with just a few odds and ends of bric-a-brac. Late yesterday evening Pillbody had finally given up counting pennies and purchases, but even so they must have come awfully close to square in the transaction if this was all that had been left unpaid for. Jimmerson climbed heavily up onto the bed and filled a crate with the leftovers, then climbed down again and hauled it into the garage where he had taken des Laumes's three crates yesterday morning. He set about methodically smashing each object to fragments with a sledgehammer, making sure that none of them could ever be sold, not even for a penny. Peterson's iron bear took the most work, but finally it too crumbled into a hundred chunky little fragments that Jimmerson dumped into a pickle jar and capped off. And now, with Pillbody's stuff either consumed or broken, and des Laumes's café cleaned out, the whole lot of it was once again a memory, a thing of the past.

He went inside where he showered and shaved and changed into fresh clothes, and then he hauled the single bed outside and threw it onto the back of the truck, replacing it in the bedroom once again with the double bed from out by the garage. Edna's remembrances—the paperweight, the postcard, the silver spoon, and the glass Pontiac—he put into the curio cabinet in the living room. He would never know what they meant, and

their presence in the house would remind him of that. He opened the windows finally, to let the air in, and then went out through the front door, climbed into the Mercury, and drove downtown.

The curiosity shop was emptied out, no longer a mystery. The old storefront, with its dusty litter, its confusing mirrors, and its nailed-shut door had been swept clean, and he could see through the window into the rear of the shop now, clear back into Pillbody's parlor room where workmen were rolling fresh paint onto the walls. He got back into the Mercury and headed west. The Café des Laumes had collapsed on itself, the windows shattered, the walls fallen in, the roof settled over the wreck like a tilted hat. Jimmerson wondered if des Laumes himself was in there, under the rubble, whether the man had simply imploded in the end. To hell with him. It didn't matter anymore.

He swung a U-turn, rested his arm along the top of the seat, and drove back south toward the cemetery, where he would try once again to pray. ☞

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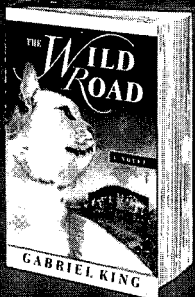
**W**E'RE EXPECTING NEXT MONTH to arrive like the proverbial lion (as in, March arrives like...) with "The Mercy Gate" by Mark J. McGarry. This sweeping sf story takes us to the alien frontier, where the distinction between archaeology and piracy becomes mighty fine and two researchers find more than they know among the alien artifacts.

Also on tap for next month is Albert E. Cowdrey's "White Magic." You may recall "The Familiar," his tale of Foo Dogs and a gargoyle (not to mention a few humans), from last year. Well, "White Magic" returns to the same New Orleans milieu, with results that are just as entertaining.

And lest you think we'll only (only?) have aliens and demons, next month we'll also bring you a bit of magic, courtesy of our old friend Kedrigern. John Morressy's "Reflection and Insight" peers into that venerable source of wisdom, or, er, confusion: the magic mirror. Who is the fairest of them all?

With a new science column by Pat Murphy and Paul Doherty, plenty of book reviews, and lots more fiction, March will be bleating with joy by the end of the issue. And then we'll celebrate springtime with stories from Richard Bowes, Michael Swanwick, Esther Friesner, Ron Goulart...and perhaps a surprise around the next corner. (All we'll say for now is that the cameras are rolling, even as we speak.) Keep that subscription up to date to make sure you won't miss any of the fun.





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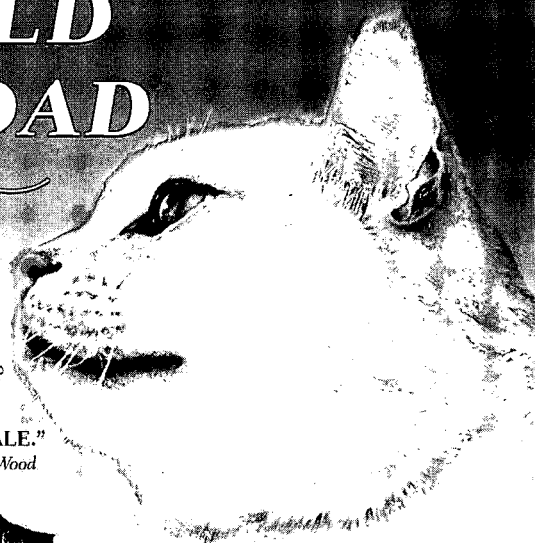
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